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**(In)Valuable (In)Visibility: Black Leading Ladies and the Performance  
of Dissenting Discourse**

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**(In)Valuable (In)Visibility: Black Leading Ladies and the Performance  
of Dissenting Discourse**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

“Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities – and the will to grasp them.”

– Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*

To the black leading ladies of my life: my grandmothers, Ida and Lola, and most especially to my mother, Constance.

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# **(In)Valuable (In)Visibility: Black Leading Ladies and the Performance of Dissenting Discourse**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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*(In)Valuable (In)Visibility* investigates the emerging persona of the black leading lady as a visible and celebrated image of contemporary black womanhood. This dissertation draws from performance studies, black studies, and black feminist studies, and argues that black women have experienced heightened acclaim in mainstream public spaces since 2008. Throughout this dissertation, the black leading lady is positioned as an embodied convergence between black women's historical degradation and their current increased popularity. The chapters of this dissertation offer focused case studies on three contemporary black leading ladies: a public figure, Michelle Obama; a fictional television character, Olivia Pope; and, a theatrical character machination, Vera Stark. The varied subjects of each chapter are explored to determine the performative consistencies of the black leading lady across setting. Each chapter works to index to the sociopolitical and sociocultural climate that makes space for her emergence.

This dissertation is thematically driven to expound on the issues that are considered most pressing to contemporary black womanhood. Chapter One explores issues of black women's citizenship through First Lady Michelle Obama. In this chapter, I argue Michelle Obama enacts a performance of archetypal black female citizenship to demonstrate how the black leading lady achieves State recognition while simultaneously

exposing and critiquing the boundaries of normative citizenship that have long excluded marginalized others. Chapter Two shifts focus to the character Olivia Pope on ABC's *Scandal*. This chapter introduces the concept of the sexual script, held in tandem with the sexual scenario, to demonstrate how the black leading lady's sexual subjectivity is made legible in mainstream television. Chapter Three explores the archival manipulation of the character Vera Stark in Lynn Nottage's play, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*. In this chapter, I reveal how the black leading lady is made to manifest in an archive that would otherwise seek her erasure. In summary, my dissertation argues the black leading lady is a critical site for asserting the vitality and vibrancy of contemporary black women.



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## Chapter One: Introduction and Overview

“Ladies were not merely women; they represented a class, a differentiated status within the generic category of ‘women.’ ...But no black woman, regardless of income, education, refinement, or character, enjoyed the status of lady.”

–Evelyn Higginbotham<sup>1</sup>

“Whatever luck or misfortune the Player has dealt to [the black woman], she is, in the moment of performance, the primary subject of her own invention.”

–Hortense Spillers<sup>2</sup>

When Michelle Obama first appeared on the national stage, she sent shock waves across the country. I vividly remember her speech from the 2008 Democratic National Convention, and how I felt absolutely mesmerized by her presence. She stood in front of thousands with, presumably, millions more watching from their own television screens, and introduced an imaging of black womanhood wholly unlike any that had previously been encountered. As argued throughout this dissertation, I have come to identify this persona as the black leading lady. I believe Michelle Obama’s unprecedented role as the first black First Lady spurred an assembly of black womanhood that melds seemingly incongruous subjectivities into a singular body. Perhaps what lingers most poignantly in my memories from 2008 is how people responded to Michelle Obama’s emergence. While some greeted the possibility of a black First Lady with eager anticipation, others still reacted with apprehension and fear. In the early days, especially, media outlets and political pundits frequently labeled the now-First Lady unpatriotic and angry. The aggression lobbied against Michelle Obama grew so hostile, in fact, that it nearly derailed

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<sup>1</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History...,” 261.

<sup>2</sup> Hortense Spillers, *Black, White and In Color*, 167.

Barack Obama's entire campaign. Many attributed these antagonistic responses to anxiety stemming from the way Michelle Obama's racially-marked body would hold representative ownership over a space wherein race should not be (and has never necessitated being) named. In fact, a reporter from the *London Times* aptly confessed, "[Michelle Obama's] heritage embodies a dark past many would rather forget."<sup>3</sup> This dissertation, therefore, argues that the black leading lady acts as the embodied convergence of black women's historical debasement with their increased visibility and popularity in contemporary mainstream spaces. With Michelle Obama, the public was tasked with expunging a dark and fully activated history from a very prominent stage. In less than a year, the result of these revisionist efforts led to Michelle Obama's public personae transforming from a gun-toting, Afro-wearing, black radical to a demurely coiffed, Jacqueline Kennedy-inspired lady;<sup>4</sup> I firmly believe activation of the black leading lady explains why.

*(In)Valuable (In)Visibility* is a project that examines how the black leading lady is made to manifest and navigate the tension between visibility and erasure, prominence and rejection, cultural significance and historical shame. Situated at the intersection of black feminist theory, black studies, and performance studies, this dissertation offers three case study analyses of ascribed black leading ladies: a public representative, Michelle Obama; a fictional television character, Olivia Pope; and, a theatrical/archival character device,

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<sup>3</sup> The *London Times* wrote a feature story on Michelle Obama's historic residency in the White House two days after Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election. See Bone, "From Slave Cabin to White House..."

<sup>4</sup> This comment is made in reference to drastically different imaging of Michelle Obama on the cover of the *New Yorker* from July 21, 2008 and March 16, 2009. Further analysis of these images can be found in chapter two.

Vera Stark. Using close textual reading as my primary method of analysis, I engage the figures of these varied texts to determine the performative consistencies of the black leading lady across genre. My selection of these three subjects stems from how they emerged as symbolic figures of contemporary black womanhood in a particular space and medium: Michelle Obama is the first black First Lady; Olivia Pope is the first black female protagonist of a primetime television drama in nearly forty years; Vera Stark diverges slightly from her black leading lady contemporaries as she (along with the play from which she derives) fails to hold similar cultural or popular significance. Yet, she is a figure who is directly involved in the politics of representation as she is most remembered within the public imaginary for her filmic performance as a slave girl. I classify these women as black leading ladies, therefore, because their presence (regardless of genre) informs how broader publics engage in discourse on black womanhood. Politics, television, and theatre are discrete forms. Yet, the persona of the black leading lady – as representative imaging – acts as a constant that demonstrates the mechanics of the space and medium framing her visibility.

The work of this dissertation is premised on the assumption that the black leading lady is a contemporary phenomenon, coming into prominence only within the last seven years. This is done, in part, to clarify the distinctive characteristics of the black leading lady from influential black women of a pre-Obama era.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, I am tasked with

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<sup>5</sup> In casual conversation, people are apt to reference a limited repository of popular black women including (but not limited to) Oprah, Halle Berry, Tyra Banks, Naomi Campbell, and Jada Pinkett Smith. With less frequency, references will be made to Condoleezza Rice, Anita Hill, or the fictional television characters Clair Huxtable from *The Cosby Show*, and Vivian Banks from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Aire*. Without

the challenge of indexing the sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions that make space for her emergence. In examining the scope of the black leading lady's operation around issues of citizenship, sexuality, and archival engagement, I demonstrate how the black leading lady unveils the issues most at stake for contemporary black womanhood. This dissertation is, first and foremost, a project that speaks to the vitality and vibrancy of black women in the United States. As such, my examination into the black leading lady is one that takes seriously the effects of representation on the livelihood of black women's everyday experiences.

Throughout the dissertation, the black leading lady will be placed in direct conversation with what Patricia Hill Collins identifies as the "controlling images" of black womanhood. According to Collins, these images (i.e., the mammy, jezebel, matriarch and welfare queen) construct black women as "Other" in an effort to preserve the boundaries of "moral and social order" (*Black Feminist* 77). In her historical account of black women's crimes in the nineteenth and twentieth century, Kali N. Gross expands this representative collection of black women's stereotypes to include the figure of the Colored Amazon. Gross describes the Colored Amazon as a popular caricature employed to further malign black women, most especially black women criminals, as antithetical to white middle-class virtues (*Colored Amazons*, 102). Generally, controlling images function as stereotypic tropes that attempt to regulate the behavior of black women as well as the behavior of those who interact with black women. As "Other," black women

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diminishing the cultural, political, and historical significance of these women – both real and fictional – this project is invested in a different sociopolitical and sociocultural context, thereby warranting their exclusion.

are the symbolic site of social regulation, the marker of undesirable (and undesired) subjectivity, and the social position to be widely avoided. As my argument works within and alongside this concept of controlling images, I seek to articulate how the black leading lady's popularity modifies debilitating aspects of black women's representative tropes, while taking interest in the extent to which the black leading lady maintains regulatory functions. Similarly to Gross's engagement with the Colored Amazon, I am interested in the way the symbolic imaging of the black leading lady both erases and reinvents social inequities (123). In this way, I remain vigilantly aware of the way in which subversive representation can be appropriated for the purpose of containment.

Given this frame, my dissertation project will address two primary research questions with accompanying sub-threads. 1. How does the black leading lady perform visibility? In order to answer this question, I will also consider: What are the performative signifiers of the black leading lady? In what ways are sexuality and sexual expression moderated for the increased visibility of black (female) bodies within U.S. (popular) culture? What is the relationship between the black leading lady, visibility, and State interests? This dissertation will also address a secondary line of inquiry. 2. How does the black leading lady inform contemporary black feminist analyses? This thread will ask: How does the black leading lady script constructions of black subjective experience? In what ways does the black leading lady contest or support subversive objectives for black womanhood?

## BLACK MATTERS

While the centrality of this research rests with subjects identified as U.S. American, I employ the terms black and blackness to reflect African Diasporic processes of black identity construction. In doing so, I acknowledge the circulation of cultural practices and cultural communication between self-identified African descendants across the globe. I also conjure a distinct articulation of black racialization processes often held in contention with raced, gendered and classed conceptions of the “lady.” To further unpack my employment of black and blackness, I turn to the introductory chapter of the newly released volume, *Black Performance Theory*, edited by Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez. Described as a project that seeks to index twenty-first century modalities of black expressive culture, the editors open with a diagnosis of the history of black naming practices. This brief overview denotes key historical moments marking the shifts in black identity construction leading to what I claim (and they identify) as an “international identity of diasporan consciousness” (2). The editors posit that in this contemporary moment, claims to “Black” or “African American” identity are often perceived as politically motivated, resistive practices of self-naming (2). Taking pause with the frame offered in *Black Performance Theory* allows space for my own assertion of black and blackness – lower-cased – developed at the interstices of two distinct sociopolitical moments: between a politically correct, multicultural charge of racial consciousness of the 1980s and 1990s, and a globalized interconnectivity of the twenty-first century that transgresses national boundaries. My intentional use of the lowercased black and blackness throughout the dissertation is a gesture toward what DeFrantz and



Gonzalez refer to as a “black sensibility” or ontological familiarity (8). In doing so, I attempt to move away from explicit Black identity politics and more toward the relational practices of black subjective experience.

This employment of black and blackness also gestures toward Trey Ellis’s notion of the “new black aesthetic,” a conceptualization of black culture that resists monolithic constructions of blackness. Ellis’s essay is integral to rearticulating black cultural performances as a practice of hybridity, or an act of borrowing from and melding with disparate cultural expressivities. From Ellis’s perspective, blackness reflects a type of artistic fluidity with an ability to embrace black aesthetics beyond “just [the continent of] Africa and jazz [music]” (“New Black” 234). Interestingly enough, my reservations toward Ellis’s work are derived from the same critical space as my appreciation for his arguments. In ways similar to Eric Lott’s response,<sup>6</sup> I find moments where Ellis misses necessary critiques of class politics. Though his analysis draws heavily on the way the arts and black bohemia influence black culture, he fails to consider the elitism of high culture politics within this operation.

In his omission of a class analysis, Ellis’s expansion of the way black and blackness are conceptualized through markers of social, cultural and economic capital erases a historical engagement with racialized subjectivity. Such an approach is destructive to my work with the black leading lady. For instance, in casual conversations about Michelle Obama, particularly, I have heard people attempt to shift focus away from

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<sup>6</sup> Lott refers to Ellis’s postmodern visioning a generous expansion of the boundaries of black intellectualism. Yet, his smart intervention suggests that the new black aesthetic is implicated by the relationship between culture and politics. For more, see Eric Lott, “Response to Trey Ellis’s ‘The New Black Aesthetic.’”

race by emphasizing her role as a lawyer, wife and mother. I believe these comments are offered in a similar vein as Ellis's "new black aesthetic," wherein people attempt to identify and know Michelle Obama beyond explicit references to the history of subjugation that her marked skin incites. Yet, the process of discarding black as a racial qualifier puts the fullness of her subjectivity at risk. This is as much the result of "post-race" idealism as it is a sheer inability to recognize and name black as an integral component to identity construction.

My employment of black and blackness in relationship to the black leading lady, therefore, is a calculated and intentional activation of the ways in which race cannot be divorced from these conversations as race is *the* reason why these conversations take place. The black leading lady is significant precisely because blackness is situated in the circulation of her imaging. The concern becomes, then, *how* race is audiened for the black leading lady. To state in other terms, my interest rests in the myriad ways race is signified for public reception of the black leading lady. The subjects featured in this dissertation are marked black through phenotype and other visual cues, political affiliation, or sociocultural references. None of these engagements are mutually exclusive; in fact, I routinely shift between these varied and diverse significations of blackness throughout the dissertation. In doing so, I embrace what E. Patrick Johnson asserts when he claims, "the fact of blackness is not always self-constituting" (*Appropriating* 2). What makes Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope, and Vera Stark "black" is wholly dependent upon the context, temporality, and the gaze that informs how these women are situated as black leading ladies. This is not said to suggest that a regulated,

politically determined notion of blackness is unwarranted or personally validated. Rather, I mean to demonstrate how the codes of blackness for the black leading ladies featured in my project are multifaceted.

Furthermore, recognizing the materiality of blackness in the black leading lady reveals how black bodies, specifically, are integral to the discursive production of black subjectivity. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, what prompted public antagonism toward Michelle Obama is the signification of her black female body in a white supremacist, patriarchal space. Limiting analysis of the black leading lady to discursive constructions, therefore, risks failing to address how “the black body” communicates the lived and shared experience of blackness. As Harvey Young details in his book, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory and the Black Body*, blackness is an abstraction ascribed onto those who reflect black phenotypic features in such a way that its conceptualization becomes “[a] shadow [that] overwhelms the actual figure” (7). As Young goes on to explain, the concept of blackness collapses the similarities of experiences across black subjects into a singular notion of “the black body.” Responding to Radika Monhanram’s phenomenological approach to blackness, Young writes, “the phenomenon of the black body...or phenomenal blackness” invites a (mis)recognition of black subjects that subsequently influences everyday, lived experience. From this vantage, Young argues that the black body is one “that has been forced into the public spotlight and given a compulsory visibility. It has been *made to be given to be seen*” (12, original emphasis). The mere codification of blackness forces the black leading lady into a position of visibility independent of the prestigious stage upon which she performs.

Young continues by building on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus to outline how performance frames black bodies as both collective and singular.<sup>7</sup> This is a useful approach for demonstrating how the black leading lady is subsumed by black cultural connectedness yet remains an individuated figure. Young proposes the concept of critical memory, which he describes as a form of black habitus that is employed to name the shared collectivity of embodied black experience. As he elaborates, critical memory "does not presume that black bodies have exactly the same memories, [but] assist[s] the process of identifying connections across black bodies and acknowledges that related histories of discrimination, violence, and migration result in similar experiences" (19). Young's work informs how the black body and performance act as co-constitutive frames. His theory of critical memory vis-à-vis black habitus is predicated on the connection between past memory, present materiality and future direction. In other words, historical precedent informs present-day behavior, which in turn affects subsequent outcomes. Young's engagement with habitus as performance demonstrates how intersecting points of habitus (what he calls *habiti*) affect individual experience in different ways (21). Given this, Young claims that behaviors are modified depending on the conditions of the *habiti* that inform a particular individual, thereby making the idea of the black body a general condition that is distinctly animated.

I find Young's work incredibly useful for thinking through how "black" informs analysis of the black leading lady's social comportment at converging points of

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach to human behavior via the theory of habitus, see *Outline of Theory of Practice*, (1977).

identification. His theory reveals how scholars of black studies identify the term “black” as both an ascription of interpellation and self-constitution. Young writes, “the theory of habitus – thought in terms of a black habitus – allows us to read the black body as socially constructed and continually constructing itself” (20). In this vein, “black” as a qualifier to the black leading lady is always simultaneously a projection and a self-(re)making. The body mobilized through the action and behavior of the black leading lady, therefore, reflects both ascribed blackness and claims to a self-made blackness. Moreover, as Young’s theory posits, the habitus of the black body is multiply informed. This supposition lends itself readily to black feminism as an analytical frame for addressing interlocking forces of oppression. As the Combahee River Collective reminds us, black women historically “do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do [they] have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have” (“A Black Feminist Statement” 236). This suggests that the black leading lady is always responding to and engaged in intersecting modalities of subjectivity. In other words, “black” is always just one of several facets that need to be taken into consideration in the black leading lady’s mobilization. I contend this applies to how the black leading lady is audienced as well as how she is recognized as an agent of her subjective constitution.

Part of the labor required in identifying the black leading lady within a particular public is knowing the relationship between the public sphere, blackness, and visibility. Frantz Fanon’s widely cited anecdote on coming into black self-consciousness through a visual performative is considered a critical moment for scholars in black studies and

black subjective experience. In his germinal text, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon recounts how his initial moment of ‘being’ in blackness occurs when he encounters a boy on the street who shouts in his direction, “Look! A Negro!” While Fanon’s project is often critiqued for failing to address the processes of identity construction for black women, the moment of “Look! A Negro!” offers, as Nicole Fleetwood professes, a “brilliant insight into the terror and trauma of being marked visually as black in the public sphere” (Fleetwood 2011, 22). The materiality of black skin cannot be severed from individualized black subject formation linked to slavery and colonialism. To identify “black” in the black leading lady is to recognize a product of violence and, in particular, a violence fueled by visually constructed processes of racialization. To name “black” is to necessarily pair the black leading lady with an already determined understanding of public. Moreover, given that performances are public, the black leading lady’s assembly and mobilization becomes much more complex and nuanced.

### **THE (BLACK) LADY**

The black leading lady is adapted from two scholarly articulations of the *black lady* developed throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The first comes from Wahneema Lubiano, who is frequently credited with offering the earliest examination into this imaging in, “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels.” Lubiano’s essay lays critical groundwork for my engagement with the black leading lady throughout this dissertation, especially in the way she wrestles with the black lady as a type of controlling image. Lubiano’s work focuses on the way mediated narratives are ascribed onto the

representative bodies of black women in ways that mobilize the public's easy and reductive sense making of black women's subjective experience. Using coverage from Anita Hill's testimony during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, Lubiano illustrates how political stakeholders marshaled imaging of the black lady, in tandem with the welfare queen, as distraction from larger structural "abuses and failures" (336). She incisively reveals how the pathological narratives attached to the black lady (for her over-achievement) and the welfare queen (for her economic dependency) resulted in "black women function[ing] as the narrative means by which the country [could] make up its mind yet again about a whole set of issues" (337). Lubiano continues her scathing indictment by claiming that the media's condemnation of Anita Hill implicated the black lady and, subsequently, black womanhood as a scapegoat for all of the nation's lingering social, political, and economic crises. On the demise of the black lady, therefore, Clarence Thomas became appointed to the Supreme Court, and was publically authorized as rescuer of black masculinity, and thereby America. The symbolism of Thomas's patriarchal jurisdiction enabled the racist, sexist, and classist appeals of State authority to be restored within the public imaginary. In the black lady's effectual containment as a false threat, the United States could continue in its usual operations of State terror without anyone being the wiser.

The historically contentious relationship between black women and the State, as revealed in media response to Anita Hill's mobilization of the black lady, suggests the black *leading* lady's assembly is a surprising turn in black women's representation. Unlike the black lady, the popularity and visibility of the black leading lady reveals her

particular assembly beyond the lens of subjugation. Yet, as I have argued to this point, and will continue to reveal throughout the dissertation, the black leading lady is still an imaging of containment. This leads me to question the limitations of Lubiano's exploration into the black lady and why I believe the black *leading* lady offers such a critical intervention with black women's representative imaging. First, Lubiano is restricted by the way she is led to understand the black lady as working in tandem with the welfare queen trope. As such, she cannot fully articulate the subject of the black lady as an independent persona. This is likely because, as Lubiano explains, the public recognizes "[the welfare queen] but does not know as easily and as consciously how to recognize the black lady" (341). From this vantage, it would seem as if the sociopolitical context that informed Anita Hill's construction as a black lady could not conceptually hold "black" and "lady" together as complementary identities.

What Lubiano's work decisively reveals is the damage these subjugated narratives of black women's representative figures have caused in circulating discourse on black womanhood. Public interaction with mediated stories, especially ones that are as well established and effective as black women's representative tropes, is precisely why conceptualizations of black women have been so resistant to change. Particularly with the black lady who, as Patricia Hill Collins suggests, "refers to [a] middle-class professional Black [woman]...represent[ing] a modern version of the politics of respectability advanced by the club women (Shaw 1996)," it may be much more daunting to recognize this figure as anything more than "benign" let alone controlling (*Black Feminist* 88). Collins's excavation illustrates the ways in which black ladies have intimate links to



many of the stereotypic representations that are explored within her text. As such, I contend the tropes of black womanhood are so damning that *any* black woman can be subsumed by definition of their representative character traits in *any* circumstance. In this vein, Lubiano's black lady could never be fully realized because dominant perceptions of the "lady" as virtuous could in no way be attributed to a black subject. My forthcoming analysis inserts "leading" to demonstrate how and why the black leading lady is a calculated departure from the black lady as well as imaging put forth by the mammy, the jezebel, the welfare queen, and the matriarch. I believe the black leading lady is an entity in her own right and needs to be discussed independent of her historical predecessors.

Part of making this shift requires that our understanding of black womanhood move its emphasis away from discursive analytics. As such, I argue for attending to the body and embodiment vis-à-vis the lens of performance. In doing so, I seek to incite a new engagement with the materialization of black women's representation, particularly that which is found in the black lady. My work with the black *leading* lady, therefore, extends Lubiano's argument by giving concentrated attention to black women's bodies, which are authorized through performance as a legitimated source of knowledge production. To further understand the relationship between the body and representative discourse, I turn to Diana Taylor's, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003). In her text, Taylor deemphasizes the privilege placed on archival, text-based knowledge by examining the repertoire, or the embodied memory, of nonreproducible ways of knowing. What is useful in Taylor's exploration is the way in which embodiment – or the repertoire – is held in tandem with the more institutionally legitimized texts of the archive through a

methodological approach that examines scenarios as “meaning-making paradigms” (28). Elements of the scenario will be further explored in chapter three with Olivia Pope’s sexual subjectivity. I introduce the concept here because of the way Taylor draws on concepts of social drama to demonstrate how the scenario informs spectator interpretation of action and movement. Even though discourse does not necessarily operate in the same way as the text-driven, materiality of an archive, I am interested in the way Taylor employs the scenario to situate the body as a conduit of knowledge transmission. In doing so, the scenario underscores how particular performances can be anticipated and why individual actors must be examined within a particular context in order to fully comprehend the layered meaning of their embodied actions. Taylor writes, “by considering scenarios as well as narratives, we expand our ability to rigorously analyze the live and the scripted...[and] the various trajectories and influences that might appear in one but not the other” (33). The scenario, therefore, reveals how the black *leading* lady will be examined beyond the discursive construction of Lubiano’s black lady and the limitations of its – and other stereotypical tropes’ – circulating subjugated narrative.

The second scholarly engagement with the black lady persona warranting greater attention appears in Lisa B. Thompson’s, *Beyond the Black Lady* (2009). In this work, the black lady is situated squarely in performance as Thompson details the relationship between representation and the black lady’s social comportment. As Thompson illustrates, the performance of black ladies is premised on an adherence to middle class propriety, particularly in respects to sexual comportment. According to Thompson, the black lady’s performance is predicated “upon aggressive shielding of the body;

concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes” (2). In her chapter devoted to Anita Hill, Thompson shifts away from Lubiano’s engagement with narrative analysis to explore how the black lady asserts authorial control over her self-imaging in the public sphere. Drawing from Anita Hill’s memoir, *Speaking Truth to Power* (1998), Thompson argues that Hill’s forthcoming disclosure of her sexuality remakes public imaging of the black lady in ways that not only legitimates the reality of black middle class womanhood, but does so in a way that allows for complexity, nuance, and expansiveness. In this vein, Anita Hill’s public testimony stands as the exemplar for how middle class black women push the boundaries of respectability politics.

My interest in Thompson’s work stems from the way her engagement with black women’s sexuality via the black lady prompts consideration for rethinking the sexual boundaries for all black women’s representative tropes. My work throughout this dissertation, however, uses Thompson’s entry to prompt a more expansive engagement with black womanhood beyond even the frame of sexuality. Discourse on black women’s subjectivity, generally, is intimately tied to issues surrounding sexual desire and sexual expressivity. This is due largely to the fact that one of the primary aims in circulating stereotypic, regulatory imagery of black womanhood is to contain black women’s sexuality: the *asexual* mammy dissuades any reference to sexual desirability for black women domestics who are positioned as threats to white women head of households; the *hypersexual* jezebel’s rampant and crazed sexuality is employed as justification for (white) men’s violent sexual urges and widespread rape of black women; the

*emasculating* matriarch explains black cultural deficiency based on the black man's inability to assert his patriarchal authority; and, the *sexually irresponsible* welfare queen is content to use her children as an easy method of securing government financial assistance. As I reveal throughout the dissertation, however, the persona of the black leading lady is not spurred chiefly by sexual regulation.

This is not to imply, however, that the black leading lady is immune to measures of sexual comportment or sexual exploitation, as I will explore in chapter three on the character Olivia Pope in ABC's *Scandal*. Rather, my interest rests in how sexuality becomes a tool for mobilizing images of black womanhood within the public imaginary. One of the primary ways in which this occurs is through the black leading lady's glaring ties to heterosexuality. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, Michelle Obama's role as First Lady is dependent upon her marriage to the president. The narrative arc of Olivia Pope in ABC's *Scandal* is wrested in her interracial affair with a male President. Though not primarily driven by romantic pursuits, even Vera Stark's storyline includes a flirtatious encounter with a male musician. Despite the varied expressiveness of heterosexuality among the black leading lady subjects featured across this dissertation (i.e., interracial/intraracial, married/single), the fact remains that heterosexuality is assumed compulsory. Lisa B. Thompson reminds us, however, that sexuality, gender, race, and representation are intimately connected in regard to how the public responds to prominent black women. In fact, as Thompson goes on to detail, sexuality played an integral role in how the media reported on former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her policy decisions (*Beyond* 2). What this suggests is that the black leading lady's

adherence to heterosexuality serves as a way of marking her legibility as a woman. My work throughout the dissertation, therefore, aims to unveil the parameters of this process. This is done in an effort to position the black leading lady in such a way that future imaging of this persona can continue to work against this sexually restrictive precedent.

Like Thompson, black feminist theorists and writers on black womanhood have addressed the complication of black womanhood and sexuality through work that explicitly reveals the nuances of black women's sexual expression. Doing so serves as a way to speak against erasures of black female sexuality and to be more truthful in the representations that are offered. As Hortense Spillers reminds us, "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb" (*Black White* 153, italics in text). The reference to "their" is indicative of the patriarchal order that has historically denied black women's ability to name themselves or their sexuality. The scholarship produced along the lines of sexuality and black womanhood is both essential and extensive.<sup>8</sup> What I aim to address throughout this dissertation, however, are the ways in which the black leading lady operates symbolically beyond the narrative thread of sexuality. This is especially true in the chapter focusing on Vera Stark given that the analysis is mostly devoid of explicit connections to sexual expressivity.

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<sup>8</sup> Please see: Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 251- 274; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Beyond the Sound of Silence: Afro-American Women in History," *Gender & History* 1 (Spring 1989): 50 – 67; Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Summer 1992): 738 – 755; Ann DuCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies," *Signs* 19 (Spring 1994): 591 – 629; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (2005); M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2006).

Even as my work actively asserts multiple entry points to engaging black womanhood beyond sexual discourse, it still relies on an implicit association with middle class signification. The black leading lady, in her essence, is conceptualized as a gendered and racialized performance of social class. I place an emphasis on social class, in part, to underscore how the figures of my dissertation are understood as having tremendous access to social and cultural capital, though my interest is mostly in the embodied perception of such privileges. According to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, for black women, a “lady” historically embodies the Victorian standards of middle-to-upper class white women’s respectability politics elevated throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century by black Baptist women and the women’s club movements. In her book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Higginbotham details how leadership of educated black women in the church directly affected African American progress across the United States. Known as the Female Talented Tenth, or the woman-identified component of W. E. B. DuBois’s Talented Tenth, these women organized to establish religious and educational institutions devoted to cultivating black women for the project of racial uplift in accordance with U.S. middle class values. As Higginbotham goes on to reveal, however, in the years between 1890 and 1920, “only 1 percent [of black women in the workforce] enjoyed a middle-class status distinguishable from the economic and social status of female agricultural laborers and domestic servants – the vast majority of employed black women” (40). Given this, black women who embodied middle-class comportment in an early twentieth century context often did so without the assumed authority of economic

capital through wealth or income. As such, while a middle-class *economic* status is assumed with the black leading lady, the focus throughout this dissertation will be placed on the *embodiment* of middle-class propriety and aesthetics.<sup>9</sup>

## THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY AND ICONICITY

Emphasizing “leading” within the construction of the black leading lady is, in my opinion, key to the forthcoming analysis and what distinguishes the subjects featured throughout this dissertation. What I find particularly provocative about the marker “leading” is how it acts as an ideological bridge between two dissenting modalities of subjectivity: “black” and “lady.” The previous section revealed the black lady as both contradictory and insufficient in her discursive authority. Amending the black lady into a black *leading* lady, however, allows the language employed in her moniker to help shift discursive, embodied and performative expectations of her public persona. Consider for a moment widespread comparisons between Michelle Obama and former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. The very fact that *any* similarities can be made between a black woman and Jacqueline Kennedy – regardless of their comparative youth, education, or wealth – demonstrates the importance of how blackness becomes conceptually reshaped when visible in unfamiliar, and racially restrictive, spaces. Michelle Obama is an historic departure from the idealized First Lady by way of white womanhood. The publically perceived role of First Lady has not changed; what *has* changed is the body that activates

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<sup>9</sup> For more readings on black middle class politics and history, please see: W. E. B. Dubois, *W. E. B. DuBois Writings*, 1987; E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, 1957; Ellis Cose, *The Rage of a Privileged Class*, 1993; and, Mary Patillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class*, 1999.

the role. This same incongruity is encountered in the context and storylines of both Olivia Pope and Vera Stark: the former is made prominent for being the first black female protagonist in a television drama in nearly 40 years; the latter for seeking fame and career vitality without yielding to stereotypic imaging. I believe the act of rehabilitating black women in roles traditionally reserved for white subjects is less about overhauling the conditions of the role and is, instead, about getting the public to accept insertion of the racial anomaly into a normative frame; this is where I find the black leading lady to be most effective.

As such, I argue the most efficient way to circumvent resistive antagonisms to the type of racial digression informed by the black lady is to make connections to iconicity vis-à-vis “leading.” As Nicole Fleetwood explains in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness*, “The icon is a fixed image so immersed in rehearsed narratives that it replaces the need for narrative unfolding” (46). Jacqueline Kennedy is, without hesitation, a U.S. national icon. Therefore, by way of “leading,” Michelle Obama is ideologically tied to a revered persona of national iconicity. In so doing, the legibility of her black womanhood is better substantiated within the public imaginary. As a black leading lady, she becomes less of a contentious presence. Being attached to the familiar elegance of an icon enables the black leading lady to better hold the incongruity of her charged identity markers together in a singular body. Moreover, it enables the public to more easily name and accept this unfamiliar pairing of subjective expression. In this way, via the black *leading* lady, audiences are prompted to shift their focus to the reverence of



iconicity, rather than fixate on the complexity of the black lady as a misplaced racial subject.

Reconceptualization of the black lady vis-à-vis “leading,” therefore, is both a rhetorical and an embodied operation. As a rhetorical signifier, “leading” – like icon – does the work of presenting its subject as “larger-than-life” (33). This is what I believe occurred during the early days of public introduction to Michelle Obama through media driven comparisons between her and Jacqueline Kennedy. In her easy association with Jacqueline Kennedy’s reverence, Michelle Obama’s blackness became more legible – and acceptable – within mainstream publics. Yet, in this process, Michelle Obama also became conflated with notions of exceptional blackness. Fleetwood suggests, however, there is a way to destabilize the labor of iconicity, wherein black icons can become framed in such a way that they are no longer narratively positioned along a binary that would otherwise render them either exemplary or delinquent (47). Fleetwood goes on to engage the concept of non-iconicity through an exploration of Charles Harris’s civil rights photography. She demonstrates how Harris’s photos capture acts of the everyday, which, upon insertion into the photographic archive of the Civil Rights movement, become a demonstration for the layered complexity of black American’s liberatory practices of freedom. Fleetwood argues that Harris’s appeal to non-iconicity and normativity inserts black life into a visual field that would, otherwise, only understand blackness and black bodies as either (hyper)visible icons or invisible deviants.

By grounding the black leading lady in performance, however, I would like to expand how “leading” moves beyond the rhetorical to frame the embodied mobilization

of this contemporary persona in ways similar to the non-icon. According to Fleetwood's analysis, Harris employed documentary photography as an indexical praxis for inserting the breadth and multiplicity of black life into the archive of Civil Rights imaging, and in doing so provided a way to read black life beyond the (hyper)visible icon/invisible deviant binary. Through the black leading lady, I engage this interruption, but without abandoning the utility of the rhetorical icon. In this way, I understand "leading" to draw on notions of iconicity but only insofar as to maintain a productive tension between black iconicity and black deviance.<sup>10</sup> The rhetorical, in essence, provides a frame within which to read the embodied, engaged, and active mobilization of the black leading lady.

The productive tension incited by "leading" assembles the black leading lady as a performative reconciliation of culturally, socially, and politically loaded histories. Employing performative in this context draws on J. L. Austin's speech act theory wherein words are described as actions that shape reality. Austin's premise suggests that language is transformative and in the utterance of a particular word or phrase the material conditions are recreated (i.e., proclaiming "I do" is an action that joins two people into the legal contract of marriage). My use of performative in relationship to the black leading lady is an iteration of the idea that language performs. I employ leading in its most active sense and always in service of the black lady and black womanhood. Unlike the icon, however, leading is not versed in fixity. "Leading" is a directive and, as such, is constantly in motion; it triggers collective identification of the black lady through newly

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<sup>10</sup> I will further explore this idea of "productive tension" in relationship to Arthur Knight's work on twentieth century black stardom later in chapter four and Vera Stark.

– and instantly – accepted codifications of race, gender, class, and heteronormativity. “Leading” qualifies black womanhood as popular, palatable, and approachable. “Leading” inserts black women into the public sphere and imbues her with a type of inalienable citizenship. “Leading” presents the black lady’s sexual comportment as tantalizing and enviable, as opposed too morally objectionable. “Leading” substantiates black womanhood for archival consideration. “Leading” strikes the black lady with charisma, eloquence, and an arresting presence. Taken together with “leading,” the black lady becomes recognizable and reassuring.

Moreover, emphasizing “leading” also draws attention to how the black leading lady is historicized within the context of other celebrated black women. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, I entered into discussion around the black leading lady because of Michelle Obama’s emergence as the first black First Lady and the way the public responded to her historic role. Though Michelle Obama is made to manifest as a black leading lady within the field of politics, she does not, however, function as a political figure in the same way as Condoleezza Rice. As will be further explored in chapter two, Michelle Obama’s historicity is intimately related to her first lady contemporaries, especially given that the First Lady is not a publically appointed position. Condoleezza Rice, in contrast, is a political figure because her service as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State influences the nation’s position on State affairs. Her authority is derived from a presidential appointment and Senate confirmation. The First Lady serves as a public political figure through the simple fact that she is bound in legal matrimony to

the president. She is not financially compensated for her public service and only occupies her position because her agreement to marriage.

This is an important point of clarification in that it demonstrates the process of historicizing the black leading lady across genre. In this way, my attention to leading is a way to further substantiate the idea of popularity within black leading lady imaging. Initially, my articulation of popular is used in the most lay sense of the term: as someone who is, overwhelmingly, well liked by the public across demographic. Since entering the White House, Michelle Obama has maintained a high favorability rating, which at 68% is more than 20 points higher than that of her husband. Moreover, she is ascribed as holding a 96% favorability rating with both black women and black men.<sup>11</sup> This same type of popular appeal, however, did not apply to Condoleezza Rice during her time in the Bush administration as National Security Advisor or Secretary of State, (though rumors circulated around her bid for the Vice Presidency during Mitt Romney's unsuccessful presidential campaign in 2012). In fact, much of Condoleezza Rice's influence as a black leader is marred by her affiliation with George W. Bush's administration, including her involvement with post-9/11 foreign policy and the war in Iraq.<sup>12</sup> As such, the way I situate Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope, and Vera Stark is in direct relationship to how these women spark popular engagement with black leading lady imaging as a figure of black womanhood that appears magnified in the public imaginary in extraordinary ways.

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<sup>11</sup> These numbers are according to the Pew Research Center report from January 2014. For more information, see Andrew Kohut's, "Barack Obama's Better Half."

<sup>12</sup> Condoleezza Rice rescinded her invitation to speak at Rutgers University commencement ceremony in 2014 amidst student and faculty protests. See Kristina Sguelgia, "Condoleezza Rice Declines to Speak..."

The black lady is also reconfigured vis-à-vis leading through an association with stardom. As a performative signifier, “leading” draws on a shared understanding of principal female performers in film, television and on the theatrical stage. Historically, the leading lady is widely distinguished as the supporting female character to any male protagonist in a narrative. While it is no longer necessary to have a central male character present in contemporary performances, the notion of the leading lady as engendering star qualities remains.<sup>13</sup> The concept of stardom is borrowed from Richard Dyer’s examination of Hollywood film actors in the early- to mid-twentieth century, and will be taken up in more depth in chapter four on Vera Stark. In his book, *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer asserts that film stars are a strategic negotiation between the private interests of an actor and public consumption of the actor’s persona marketed by Hollywood. Dyer contends, “stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces” (5). The commoditization of the film star, therefore, is a calculated management of individuality with the public response to these constructions as they speak to processes of capitalist production.

What is useful in Dyer’s theorization of stardom in relationship to the black leading lady is the way in which Dyer complicates the construction of the individual within the division of private and public. Dyer asserts that notions of individuality (as “the self,” as unique, as isolated) are often understood as distinct from processes of society (or, that which emanates from the public). Dyer considers this a paradoxical

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<sup>13</sup> The “leading lady” is an under theorized concept. Scholarship on women in film, television and theatre makes reference to women, generally, while attention to exceptional female actresses within these performance forms is limited to individual case studies. We recognize a leading lady without necessarily making critical links to the phenomenon of her production.

relationship: the star is alluring because of his/her seeming uniqueness, yet the star is a reflection of what individuals perceive of and experience in everyday life, all of which is tied to capitalism and industry. Within this paradox, the black leading lady is revealed as a complicated assembly of her own individual agency coupled with expectations from the public. As Dyer expounds,

Being interested in stars is being interested in how we are human now. We're fascinated by [film] stars because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organization of life into public private spheres. We love them because they represent how we think that experience is or how it would be lovely to feel that it is. Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed (15-16).

From this vantage, Dyer's theorization of stardom situates my work with the black leading lady as a necessary imperative. To engage the complexity of the black leading lady, as a paradox, as a suspension between conflicting modalities, demonstrates the type of sense making that is currently taking place in contemporary U.S. society.

### **ACTIVATING RESISTANCE**

Before delving into the methodology and chapter breakdown, I want to return to the concept of controlling images as they connect to the black leading lady and how this persona reshapes black womanhood within the public imaginary. Throughout the introduction, I have presented an overview of literature that expounds on the dynamic and complicated assembly of the black leading lady related to her raced, classed, and gendered significations (i.e., "black" and "lady") alongside her progressive index vis-à-vis "leading." Patricia Hill Collins presents controlling imagery of black womanhood (i.e., the mammy, jezebel, matriarch, and welfare queen) as a regulatory operation.

Inserting the black leading lady into this discourse, therefore, necessitates consideration for the types of social containment that she incites. My engagement with the black leading lady is predicated on the assumption that this imaging would not exist if not for the presence of blackness on the global stage. The Obama's tenure in the White House required black subjectivity to be situated on behalf of the United States' democratic, capitalist, heteronormative, and commoditized interests. More importantly, their introduction as First Family rested almost entirely on public acceptance of Michelle Obama as First Lady. The process of restructuring Michelle Obama's public persona for the nation's approval vis-à-vis the black leading lady launched the possibility of Olivia Pope's arrival in television, and Vera Stark's emergence on the stage. This is not, however, an argument for a causal relationship between these three figures. I mean simply to suggest that Michelle Obama's mobilization as a black leading lady opened the possibility for other positive imaging given that the public no longer had to engage black womanhood from the point of subjugation. Unlike Collins's controlling imagery, the black leading lady remakes black womanhood in the public sphere as a celebrated figure.

Because of this, my conceptualization of the black leading lady must yield to the limits of her revolutionary potential. I admit: as gratifying as it is to have a "positive" and popular rendering of black womanhood in mainstream focus, I believe the black leading lady still operates – in some respect – for the purpose of containment. In other words, if the black leading lady were wholly revolutionary in her imaging, she would not invite such widespread acceptance. As I go on to detail in the following chapters, the black leading lady is required to adhere to normative precedence, especially if she is to gain

access to a particular public platform. There is, for instance, an element of Michelle Obama's gendered citizenship that must maintain the institutional practices established by her First Lady predecessors. There is a way in which Olivia Pope's interracial sexual relationships will always rely on the tantalizing narrative of miscegenation taboos. Silences in the archives of black women's filmic representation will invariably inform how fictional characters, like Vera Stark, are created.

Despite the restrictions imposed on the radical potential of the black leading lady, the work of my dissertation still carves space to consider her subversive qualities. In fact, I argue the same productive tension incited by the black leading lady that subsequently catapults her into public prominence also amplifies the opportunity for her insurgency. In this way, I understand the black leading lady to differ from Collins's controlling imagery in that she is not reduced to serving only mainstream interests by reinforcing oppressive structures. As I demonstrate with Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal citizenship, and Olivia Pope's sexual subjectivity, if the black leading lady were wholly an invention for the dominant, white supremacist gaze, she would have no standing with marginalized communities, particularly black women. In fact, as Vera Stark's encounter with the film archive reveals, black subjects constituted within and viewed as perpetuating a racist frame, fail to be remembered beyond the purpose of maintaining systemic subjugation. Moreover, my argument for the black leading lady's resistive potential is based – in part – on the fact that it is black women who author all three subjects of this dissertation. With Michelle Obama, it is a self-authored black womanhood (though, admittedly, managed by a host of government aides and prescribed



by public expectation). The fictional characters of Olivia Pope and Vera Stark are the design of Shonda Rhimes and Lynn Nottage, respectively, both of whom are renowned writers/creators in their field. As such, even as the black leading lady acquiesces to normative antecedents of social constructions related to race, gender, class, and sexuality, she remains primed for an oppositional counter.

In this vein, I assert the black leading lady is an imaging that claims agency for black womanhood within mainstream contexts. It is a foundational tenet of black feminist criticism to intervene with dominant and stereotypic representations of blackness. Black feminist theory is one of the most consistently activated tools employed to deconstruct popular representations of black women found in mediated filmic, television, and literary imagery, as well as the theatrical stage.<sup>14</sup> My engagement with the black leading lady, however, is less a project relegated to recovery or intervention even as it subscribes to a black feminist frame. In fact, by grounding the black leading lady in performance studies, I seek to make resistance implicit. I take as a given that performance, at its core, is a political project. As such, to engage performance work is to necessarily situate and interrogate the effects of power, privilege and systemic authority on human life. Bell hooks writes that performance in the black community has been integral to undermining white supremacist social norms. She goes on to assert, performance “created a cultural context where one could transgress the boundaries of accepted speech, both in relationship to the dominant white culture, and to the decorum of African-American

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<sup>14</sup> For a survey of texts that employ this type of analysis, see Jacqueline Bobo (Ed.), *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*; bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*; and Lisa M. Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*.

cultural mores” (“Performance Practice” 212). My analysis of the subjects featured within this dissertation, therefore, is interested in the way the embodiment and performance of the black leading lady is necessarily antagonistic. Hooks’s theory suggests that performance enables African Americans to counter both black respectability politics and Eurocentric belief in black inferiority. Within the context of this work, however, I demonstrate how the black leading lady pushes against the simplicity of that binary.

The popularity of the black leading lady assumes a type of commodification related to her public persona. Hooks’s description of the radical potential of performance reminds us, however, that commoditized performances of blackness are rarely positioned for radical intervention. As she goes on to explain, “As [a] mass product of live performance [black subjectivity] can rarely address the local in a meaningful way, because the primacy of addressing the local is sacrificed to the desire to engage a wider audience of paying consumers” (215). The very emergence of the black leading lady suggests there is a particular performance of black womanhood that garners mass appeal. Yet, as I reveal throughout this dissertation, there is specificity to her comportment that makes claims to and is invested in those who are relegated to life on the margins. Given this, I wonder to what extent the performance of the black leading lady is bound to the totality of radical ideology? In other words, where is the boundary between radical and resistant?

My prolonged meditation on hooks’s work arises from a complication I notice with the black leading lady as a seemingly liminal figure. Because the black leading lady

is wrested between conflicting modalities of subjectivities (i.e., black and lady), she can never subscribe fully to one mode of identification over another. In other words, the black leading lady cannot bracket her racial identification or distance herself from the effects of her privilege. Signified by “leading,” therefore, the black leading lady is suspended between notions of racialized subjugation and classed/gendered elitism. This is a point I have laid out in detail throughout this chapter. Where it takes shape and troubles the case studies that follow with Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope and Vera Stark is in how this suspension supports these subjects while working in service of black women’s subjective representation. The popularity of the black leading lady persona enables those black women who subscribe to her imaging easier access to public platforms previously denied. Hooks’s critique of commoditized black performance suggests that such enactments are limited in their potential for radical intervention. My analysis of the black leading lady, however, challenges the parameters of radical ideology and intention. The black leading lady is not subversive only insofar as she rejects racist white supremacist interpolation of black subjectivity. Nor is she simply a product of the capitalist market that needs blackness contained in particular packaging. As I demonstrate through Michelle Obama’s citizenship, Olivia Pope’s sexual expressivity, and Vera Stark’s archival emergence, the black leading lady operates in such a way that one must remain constantly vigilant in how she is audienced. In other words, I claim the pedagogical and radical intervention of the black leading lady is the direct result of recognizing the limitations of a singular notion of radical.

I am reminded of Audre Lorde who proclaims with great shrewdness that women's survival along the margins (particularly black women) can only occur in community and solidarity. Otherwise, any semblance of freedom for an individual is, in actuality, a temporary ceasefire between the subjugated and her oppressor. As Lorde cautions, "*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (*Sister Outsider* 112, italics in text). Lorde goes on to claim this edict is only considered unwelcomed by those who have come to believe their livelihood rests solely in the master's favor. I wholly agree with Lorde, but I struggle to wed her insight with the complexity of the black leading lady. Like hooks, Lorde is similarly invested in a particular notion of radical intervention, which is often in direct contention with normative operations. Speaking with great trepidation, I ask to what extent *must* we hold the black leading lady to complete revolution? Is it possible to allow the black leading lady space to simply chip away at the master's house? In other words, how do we productively engage the black leading lady without vilifying her conformity and in keen recognition of how she shifts discourse on black women's inferiority and subjugation?

### **MASKING TRANSGRESSION**

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century practices of blackface minstrelsy offer a useful site for examining the preceding complication of the black leading lady as a contradictory and complex exhibition of black subjectivity through commoditized public performance. Blackface minstrelsy is touted as one of the most shameful performance

traditions created in the United States. Scholars of blackface minstrelsy locate its origins in the antebellum industrialized north wherein working class white men performed caricatured blackness for the amusement of white audiences. As a performance practice, blackface minstrelsy sought to mollify the social anxiety of white Americans (particularly white males) toward developing interracial interactions between blacks and whites. Without the institution of slavery to regulate racial difference, blackface minstrelsy offered the stage as a site for exploring, navigating and, to a certain extent, regulating racial tension. In his widely acclaimed book, *Love & Theft* (1995), Eric Lott identifies this racially exploitative performance tradition as a “dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy” (18) for working-class white Americans. Though many contemporaries are inclined to dismiss minstrelsy as a wholly racist practice, Lott contends that its production, along with the way audiences responded to the performances, were often contradictory and varied.<sup>15</sup> He goes on to claim this was as much the result of the slipperiness of racial boundaries as it was white desire to maintain its fixity. Lott contends, “Although minstrelsy was indeed in the business of staging or producing ‘race,’ that very enterprise also involved it in a carnivalizing of race...such that the minstrel show’s ideological production became more contradictory, its consumption more indeterminate, its political effects more plural” (20). It would seem, from this vantage, that predicting how the public will respond to the black leading lady is as difficult as

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth mentioning that the variances in white audience response would extend to the black audiences of minstrel performances, as well. This raises interesting implications for contemporary audiences of the black leading lady, especially for those who identify as black. This point is made specifically in reference to my work on Olivia Pope’s sexual subjectivity in ABC’s *Scandal*, and the series’ popularity among black and non-black television viewers.

determining her representative impact. The black leading lady's persona, public platform, and audiences are simultaneously dialogical (talking through and with the other) and dialectical (infinitely opposed).

The way Lott wrestles with blackface minstrelsy is incredibly illuminating for how black leading ladies are conceptualized as constantly negotiated contradictions. Lott employs the concept of masking to explain the breadth of representational effects resulting from white bodies behind black performative covers. He argues the variability of the minstrel form along with the instability of class and race ideology negotiated through minstrel shows led many white performers to rely on blackface masks to shield their criticism of class politics. Lott also claims that as the form shifted, and minstrel characters sought to reflect the boisterous strength of southwestern stage heroes like Davy Crockett, blackface performance began to subtly (and unknowingly) insert resistive narratives into its musical lyrics. Even with the mask of, what Lott identifies as “‘happy-go-lucky’ bravado,” the “references to sectional conflict... [and] a black desire for freedom...all in a context of general insolence, were certainly nothing to be laughed off” (24). In this vein, the cover of the black minstrel mask led to the possibility of what Barbara Babcock-Abrahams calls “symbolic inversion” (qtd. in Lott 24) making direct space for the potential of black insurgency.

Because blackface minstrelsy originated as a form of racial mimicry about *black* bodies by *white* subjects, significant questions are raised about the types of transgressive strategies that can be ascribed to black bodies in blackface. This predicament is precisely what I see arising in audience engagement with the black leading lady, especially in her

acquiescence to normative precedents via her popular public performance. Scholarly investigations into black-on-black (or black) minstrelsy are often “dismissed as pathological or an unfortunate and pitiable sideline in the transition from a more passive political era into a much more self-assertive and militant one” (Chude-Sokei 10). In other words, within a contemporary understanding of minstrelsy’s racist underpinnings, it is difficult to take seriously or give sociopolitical credit to black performers who willingly stepped into and perpetuated the degradation of the minstrel mask in blackface performance.

In many ways, I believe the black leading lady is victim to a similar type of critique. Unfortunately, extensive analysis of this claim extends beyond the parameters of the dissertation. Yet, I offer this point here to indicate how each subject featured in the following chapters encounters moments where the charge of their racial identification is placed in direct conflict with their broad appeal. Michelle Obama regularly draws from her working-class Chicago upbringing as a point of connection to the mass public while reportedly drawing in a six-figure income higher than her husband’s. Olivia Pope has the most successful and prolonged sexual relationships with white men; her black male sexual partners are rendered virtually obsolete. The central conflict of Vera Stark’s narrative is sadly reflective of most black actors in the early part of the twentieth century: play the stereotype for possible career advancement or risk drifting into performer obscurity.

What I want to situate within this discussion of the black leading lady, however, is the way the boundaries for subversive potential through popular performances are far

from finite. Attending to the sociopolitical, sociocultural, and historical climate within which the black leading lady emerges reveals a confluence of dialectics that necessitates our awareness of the work that she does, even if it fails to resemble what is typically perceived as radical expressivity. In his book, *The Last Darky* (2006), Louis Chude-Sokei offers a critical examination into how blackface performer Bert Williams operated as a crucial figure in the black political climate in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. As a performer in Ziegfield Follies, Williams became the first black artist to perform with whites in a staged musical production by intentionally employing what Chude-Sokei calls the “poetics of masking” (18). He goes on to claim that Williams’s willingness to enter into an institutional agreement with blackface performance resulted from his desire to act as a “pioneer” for working black artists. As Chude-Sokei writes, “to enter on the white stage as a black performer [required] that [Williams] wear the minstrel mask as if hyperbolically to signify his difference as [“Other”] while simultaneously comforting the audience with warm, familiar, unthreatening meanings of minstrelsy” (18). The popularity of the black leading lady is spurred precisely because she fails to present herself as a threat on the mainstream stage. Yet, as Chude-Sokei reminds us, while white artists put on blackface to emphasize that one “was *not* a Negro, Bert Williams’s was worn to emphasize that he emphatically was one – and in so doing he maintained an epistemological balance, a social contract” (35, italics in text). Like Williams, I see the black leading lady’s acceptance of her popularity, and her agreement to acquiesce to mainstream comportment not so much as a racial betrayal but, rather, as a



unique opportunity to assert and claim racial authority over her subjective expressivity on the mainstream stage.

## **METHODOLOGY**

*(In)Valuable (In)Visibility* investigates the black leading lady as a complex and contradictory imaging of contemporary black womanhood. Throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate how the black leading lady operates as a representative and popular persona of black women's subjectivity on a visible and public platform. My work relies on close textual readings as the primary methodology while drawing on performance theory, critical race theory, and black feminist theory as grounding analytical tools. The close readings that follow draw from a variety of sources to support my analysis. Each chapter of this dissertation is thematically driven to expound on concerns of modern black womanhood broadly related to citizenship and visibility, sexual subjectivity, as well as history and futurity. In chapter two, I take up the concept of citizenship through Michelle Obama's focus on childhood obesity and the *Let's Move!* campaign. The primary text of analysis includes the video recording of Michelle Obama's campaign launch speech featured on the official White House website. This video is demonstrative of how the black leading lady locates discourse of citizenship within black womanhood. I supplement my arguments throughout the chapter with image analysis of two *New Yorker* covers on Michelle Obama printed on July 21, 2008 and March 16, 2009; these illustrations are offered as evidence for Michelle Obama's public transformation into the black leading lady persona. I also examine a video recording of Michelle Obama's

appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Jimmy Fallon in a segment titled, “The Evolution of Mom Dancing,” published to YouTube on February 22, 2013. This video is engaged to demonstrate how Michelle Obama’s imaging as a black leading lady translates across popular media. All three texts are illustrative of the widespread visibility of the black leading lady’s performance and how it informs U.S. constructions of citizenship.

In chapter three, I shift my focus to explore the black leading lady and sexual subjectivity via Olivia Pope in ABC’s *Scandal*. The work of this chapter began in the fall of 2013 as *Scandal* moved into its third season of production. Taking notice with how the format of the show had shifted since the inaugural season to include more of Olivia Pope’s backstory, I decided to limit the scope of my analysis to the first two seasons. As the series deepened its exploration into Olivia Pope’s personal life, I felt strongly that such material had a significant impact on how audiences came to understand her sexual subjectivity. As such, within these two seasons, I selected two episodes to ground my theoretical supposition on Olivia Pope’s sexual subjectivity as a black leading lady: Season 1, Episode 6, “The Trail,” for its narrative focus on Olivia Pope’s illicit interracial affair with the white President of the United States (which is also the driving force of the show); and, Season 2, Episode 8, “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” due to the fact this episode features the first explicit reference to race within the series. These episodes are illustrative of the narrative devices employed that aid in making legible the black leading lady as a sexual subject in television. Turning my attention to history and futurity, chapter four examines the archival emergence of the black leading lady in Lynn Nottage’s play, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*. In May 2013, I attended two performances of *By The Way*,

*Meet Vera Stark* at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois, but will root my analysis in a close reading of the play, which was published later that year.

At the heart of this dissertation, I demonstrate through the black leading lady how the body is licensed as a critical site of knowledge production. Moreover, the confluence of the interpretive frames and theoretical premises that ground my work with the black leading lady make space for considering the possibility of black feminist performance criticism as an individuated and distinct methodological engagement. I approach my specific focus on citizenship, sexuality, and the archive as interrelated fragments of a larger story in the (re)making. My analysis of the black leading lady in the figures of Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope, and Vera Stark are primarily concerned with genealogy and connectivity. On its most basic level, my dissertation is a compilation of moments indexed as points of departure. I engage the black leading lady to offer a fuller illustration of where we have been, a more comprehensive understanding of where we are now, and a cautionary focus on where we are going.

The question driving my work across this dissertation asks, what contexts allow for the popularity and visibility of black women via the black leading lady? Within this larger inquiry, I am also interested in the following sub-threads: What historical narratives routinely circulate within contemporary discourse on black womanhood as they inform the black leading lady? Who audiences the black leading lady? Does it matter if the black leading lady's audience is predominantly non-black? In what way is the black leading lady primed to critique her present sociopolitical and sociocultural climate? How is the black leading lady interrupting normative precedents? In what ways does the black

leading lady reinforce hegemonic strictures? Perhaps, most importantly, I seek answers to these questions in a way that honors the fullness of black women's subjective experience. My reading of Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope, and Vera Stark is careful to resist framing their cultural significance via narratives of exceptionalism. Even as the black leading lady is conceptualized through her ability to appear unprecedented, in no way do I want to suggest that U.S. black women are only guaranteed their right to claim social value by mimicking the black leading lady's performative countenance. The black leading lady is merely an emerging site to address the multiplicity of black women's lived reality within a contemporary context.

This dissertation is written at a time wherein access to voices proclaiming a black feminist consciousness is more readily available, even if not wholly prolific. Black feminism was formalized as a disciplinary field during the 1960s and 1970s when activist movements of identity politics were dominated by white women and black men, and always in service to white heteropatriarchy.<sup>16</sup> Lisa Anderson (2008) and Joy James (1999) contend that, as a tool of analysis, black feminist criticism holds the "greatest currency" within literary studies.<sup>17</sup> As a literary intervention, black feminist criticism

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<sup>16</sup> Black feminists have long been involved in organizing efforts for liberation. The 1960s proved particularly challenging in that, at the intersection of the Civil Rights and women's movements, black women were left largely unrecognized. In response to these exclusionary practices, black feminists established separate organizations focused on their intersectional identity politics. This includes the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) founded in 1973, and the Combahee River Collective, which emerged in 1974 out of NBFO's Boston chapter. These organizing efforts eventually led to the founding of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in 1981, a publishing company exclusively committed to black feminist writing, including *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), edited by Barbara Smith. For a survey of black feminist writings from the 1960s and 1970s, please see, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995), edited by Beverly Guy-Sheffall.

<sup>17</sup> The phrase "greatest currency" (*Shadowboxing* 11) is used specifically within James's text but both authors acknowledge literature as a prevailing vehicle for circulation of black feminist exploration.

emerged to counter both stereotypic representations of black femininity and to address widespread erasures and silences of black women's voices at the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality, and across various public platforms and fields of study. My engagement with the black leading lady through a black feminist frame is not exclusively invested in speaking to caricatured tropes or recovering silenced narratives on black women's livelihood. In fact, I would argue that my interaction with these foundational approaches is more for the effect of marking the entry into contemporary black feminist responses to black women's representation.

With this in mind, I would like to set forth parameters of a black feminist performance analysis as employed throughout this dissertation. My introduction of this methodological approach stems from a desire to find stronger language for and build a more explicit connection between performance theory and critical race theory under the umbrella of black feminism. For the sake of clarity, my intent in doing so is not meant to privilege black feminism at the expense of a detailed excavation into performance theory or critical race theory. Rather, I take as a given that "life lived...is the root of our beginnings and the root of our understanding" (Madison, "That Was My Occupation" 214). I have engaged my world through a black feminist frame long before I even had access to black feminist language. To this extent, I believe black feminism does for performance what E. Patrick Johnson argues about blackness "by forcing [performance theory] to ground itself in praxis" ("Black Performance Studies" 446). Yet, I am also reminded of arguments elicited by Joni L. Jones who reminds us that, "performance is theory. It need not be written *about* in order for its theory to be present" ("sista docta" 55,

original emphasis). Though Jones is addressing the way performance practice is often challenged in the academy as a legitimate form of scholarship, her claims, alongside Johnson's, reveal the difficulty in substantiating performance theory and holding it together with blackness. My point in situating black feminist performance criticism is merely an attempt at moving toward an intellectual engagement that eases the labor of drawing from and working within sometimes disparate, sometimes concordant fields of study.

In outlining the initial parameters of this approach, I assert that a black feminist performance criticism is always correlated with community and connectedness. Barbara Smith's (2001) formative essay, "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism," contends that black feminist critics must engage in the practice of self-definition and "write out of [their] own identity" (13). My analysis of the black leading lady rests squarely within a context that relies on linking my own lived experience as a black woman with the real and fictional experiences of the black female subjects featured in this dissertation and beyond. To draw from a performance studies application of Victor Turner's anthropological concept of *communitas*,<sup>18</sup> my engagement with the black leading lady and enactment of a black feminist performance criticism relies on a keen awareness of the way performance has the potential to transform disparate audiences into a uniformly engaged spectator. In this way, I understand how black feminist performance criticism unveils the black leading lady's appeal across racial demographics.

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<sup>18</sup> See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, 45-51.

A tendency of post-race rhetoric and ideology is to sever black leading ladies from wider engagement with the political issues of most concern for communities of color. I am drawn to the black leading lady because I recognize in her imaging the most vulnerable parts of myself. Moreover, I insist that her significance incites intimate changes in the lived reality of all women who identify as black. The conclusions that arise from my analyses of Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope, and Vera Stark are all grounded in an appeal to a Black Diasporic body politic. Whatever socioeconomic, political, or cultural capital ascribed to the black leading lady, I contend her conceptual freedom is dependent on that of all black women's freedom. In this way, I echo the sentiment put forth by Audre Lorde who claims, "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you" (*Sister Outsider* 132-133). A black feminist performance criticism refuses to tout any singular representation of black womanhood while understanding the consequent effect of all black women's imaging.

A black feminist performance criticism is also invested in proffering a type of speculative hope. As such I see this form of critical analysis aligning with Jill Dolan's theory of utopian performatives. For Dolan, utopian performatives demonstrate the interconnectivity between performance and politics. Thinking about the "doing" of the black leading lady, how she exists as an embodied, active, and engaged persona, reveals the power of performance to effect change. If, as I mentioned earlier, the black leading lady is resistive rather than revolutionary in her imaging, it begs consideration for the type of subversive antagonism she seeks to produce. Held in productive tension between

disparate modalities of subjectivity (i.e., black and lady), the black leading lady is a contemporary site for engaging both history and futurity. Dolan argues,

Thinking of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the ‘what if,’ rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the ‘what should be,’ allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that’s always, itself, in process to “persuade us that beyond this ‘now’ of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later (13).

What I see in Dolan’s explication is how utopian performatives create an alternate reality, one that we continually move toward even if failing to ever land upon fully. The conclusions drawn at the end of each chapter reveal black feminist performance criticism as an analytical frame that demonstrates how to dream beyond the present, even if the end is impossible and the present insufficient.

At ease with paradox, the capaciousness of black feminist performance criticism makes space for the possibility of concord and rupture at a singular site. When taking into consideration the black body, or in the case of the black leading lady, the black female body, a black feminist performance criticism attends to what performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson identifies as the dialogics and dialectics of blackness and performance. As Johnson reveals in *Appropriating Blackness*, even while performance enables black subjects as “Other” to be both seen and not seen, “blackness [at times] supercedes or explodes performance in that the modes of representation endemic to performance – the visual and spectacular – are no longer viable registers of racial identification” (8). In this vein, a black feminist performance criticism recognizes where



performance informs black subjective experience and where black signification cannot be contained in performance as a representative entity. This is reflected in a similar perspective offered by Peggy Phelan (1996) who draws on performance analyses of black representation through what she identifies as the “generative possibilities of disappearance” (27). Through black feminist performance criticism, I join the works of Johnson and Phelan together to emphasize how the black body, is known through systems of power that structure blackness as “what the looker most wants to see” (p. 24). This form of critical approach emphasizes how my investigation into the black leading lady acts as a political project that understands both conformity and resistance as simultaneously in operation.

## **CHAPTER BREAKDOWN**

Chapter Two, “Performing Archetypal (Black) Female Citizenship: First Lady Michelle Obama,” investigates how the black leading lady informs contemporary discourse on black women and citizenship. In this chapter, I argue Michelle Obama acts as an exemplar case study in that her arrival as the nation’s first black First Lady reveals the emergent assembly and visibility of the black leading lady persona. Prior to the Obama’s arrival at the White House in 2009, race was not considered a named factor in how the public anticipated the comportment of the First Lady. Michelle Obama’s racial novelty in this traditional role, however, reveals the way in which the black leading lady navigates gendered and classed constructions of citizenship with subjugated racial identity within the United States. Throughout this chapter, I argue Michelle Obama

enacts a performance of archetypal black female citizenship in her public role as First Lady. I contend the embodied practice of archetypal black female citizenship gives the appearance of conforming to the historically authorized gendered precedents of the First Lady office. In doing so, I argue the black leading lady operates under a veil that shields easy recognition of how Michelle Obama carves resistive spaces for those who live and work from the margins.

This chapter explores Michelle Obama's enactment of archetypal black female citizenship through her signature public initiative, *Let's Move!* Launched in 2010, the *Let's Move!* campaign is often touted as one of Michelle Obama's most popular public platforms, even if it has received increasing resistance over the past two years.<sup>19</sup> As I reveal in the chapter, first ladies are subject to public criticism when they are presumed to act beyond the strictures of their symbolic role as representative of U.S. (white) womanhood, especially when it involves public policy. I also briefly detail how black women in the United States have struggled to claim their rights as full citizens. Yet, in the figure of Michelle Obama, a black woman is symbolic of U.S. national womanhood thereby prompting how black women are inserted into the narrative of U.S. citizenship.

It is within this frame that I situate Michelle Obama's enactment of the black leading lady via archetypal black female citizenship. I begin my analysis by deconstructing archetypal black female citizenship into its individuated taxonomical

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<sup>19</sup> Most notably is a critique of the First Lady's partnership with the food industry featured in the 2014 documentary, *Fed Up*. The film investigates U.S. food industry regulations and rising health concerns linked to obesity. Michelle Obama is criticized for shifting her campaign tactics away from denouncing large food corporations' overuse of sugar and sugar-based products by focusing more on exercise and fitness.

components. In doing so, I demonstrate how the language of archetypal black female citizenship creates a way for the black leading lady to be conformist and revolutionary, as well as paradoxical and familiar. I go on to argue that Michelle Obama's particular performance of archetypal black female citizenship relies on the concepts of homeplace, autonomous partnership, and diva citizenship to demonstrate how the black leading lady navigates the racialized, gendered, and heteronormative antecedents of the First Lady office. In so doing, I argue the performance of archetypal black female citizenship via the black leading lady exposes the boundaries of hegemonic citizenship.

Chapter Three, "Scripting Sexuality: The Erotic Subjectivity of Olivia Pope in ABC's *Scandal*," shifts focus away from the enactment of citizenship and toward the black leading lady's sexual comportment. Even as the chapter engages with a fictional text, it maintains its grounding in the representative effects of a popular and visible black female subject. *Scandal* premiered in 2012 and introduced Olivia Pope as television's first black female protagonist in nearly forty years. I argue that while Olivia Pope exemplifies an atypical depiction of black womanhood in television, her storyline is anchored in an illicit interracial affair that eclipses her professional accolades and, subsequently, reinforces ideas of black women's hypersexuality in mass mediated forms. I go on to suggest that, as a black leading lady, Olivia Pope offers audiences an opportunity to wrestle with a conceptualization of black women's sexuality that oscillates between racist and sexist tropes and an affirmed imaging of contemporary black womanhood.

Throughout the chapter, I introduce two driving concepts for my analysis: the sexual script and the sexual scenario. I contend Olivia Pope is made visible as a black leading lady – in part – by the way her sexual expressivity draws on the easy, reductive, frame of the sexual scenario. The term, sexual scenario, is derived from work by performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor (2003), who describes the scenario as a lens that relies on tropes to make sense of bodies within a particular moment. In this vein, I argue the sexual scenario frames Olivia Pope and her illicit relationship with a white, married man (who is also the President of the United States) via the lens of sexual degradation and miscegenation. In doing so, the sexual scenario reinscribes the sexual exploitation of black women, particularly at the hands of white men. I go on to argue, however, there is a sexual script in operation that interrupts the way audiences rely on the sexual scenario to read Olivia Pope's sexual subjectivity. In this way, the sexual script is a resistive deployment, which interrupts the white supremacist gaze that depends on racial stereotypes in television.

Throughout my analysis, I draw attention to aspects of the sexual script as they appear in two selected episodes of *Scandal's* first two seasons. I limit my engagement with these episodes precisely because they represent key moments in the development of Olivia Pope's sexual subjectivity and her relationship with her lover, and as they amplify characteristics of the sexual script and sexual scenario. My analysis of the sexual script, especially, is not exhaustive. It is, instead, illustrative of the types of purposeful and intentional interventions enacted within *Scandal's* narrative to construct the black leading lady's sexual subjectivity and her desirability. Ultimately, I argue that *Scandal's*

exploration of sexuality vis-à-vis Olivia Pope and the sexual script is a method for deemphasizing black women's relationship with sexual discourse, thereby prompting greater consideration for linking black womanhood and concepts of love.

Chapter Four, "Re-presenting the Archive in Lynn Nottage's, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*", positions the black leading lady as a strategically crafted and carefully employed persona of historical negotiation. The play, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, tells the story of a fictional black actress, Vera Stark, who attempts to break into the film industry during the early 1930s without playing the role of a subservient black maid. The play is a fascinating archival excavation as Nottage assembles Vera Stark by compiling the limited histories and filmic biographies of early-twentieth century black actresses into a single story. Throughout the chapter, I illustrate how Vera Stark functions as a cautionary tale. Nottage erected her vision of a black leading lady via Vera Stark because of the deficiencies she found in the representative account of black actresses in the film archive. Through Nottage's play, I demonstrate how archives are understood as a repository of truth and also how they operate as a form of strategic manipulation. Ultimately, as I go on to contend, the archive functions as a hostile site for black womanhood, and Nottage's play demonstrates why.

Through *Vera Stark*, Nottage interacts with the limited traces of black women's representative history in film to explore how cultural memory is crafted and the dangers elicited when a particular subject (in this case, black womanhood) cannot be upheld by the archive. I argue that even as Vera Stark ultimately succumbs to the representative deficiencies of the archive available to her during the 1930s, she emerges in a

contemporary context as a black leading lady thereby revising the trajectory of the archive. In this chapter, I detail the precarious relationship between the archive and black women's representation. Using Saidiya Hartman's recovery of Venus as a model, I demonstrate how Lynn Nottage employs theatre historiography in a way that enables the black leading lady to act as a re-vision of the film archive. The work of this chapter focuses on two areas of analysis: first, how the black leading lady is constituted within the archive independent of white female film stars; and, second, how she differs from the representative tropes of the mammy and tragic mulatta. In this way, I offer a more explicit engagement with the classical leading lady of film, who was erected, in part, to maintain white supremacist gender norms in film. Doing so enables a clearer understanding of the barriers Vera Stark faced in her attempt to move beyond black domestic roles. This focus also demonstrates how Vera Stark functions as a type of signifyin(g) critique against racist filmic practices in that her emergence as a black leading lady occurs as a departure from the mammy/mulatta imaging that dominated early Hollywood films. Ultimately, I argue how by oscillating between truth and invention, Vera Stark – as a black leading lady – exposes the deficiencies of the film archive while simultaneously rendering the possibility of a different truth.

In summary, *(In)Valuable (In)Visibility* is a project that seeks to index this moment of unprecedented and, to an extent, unbelievable positive public response to contemporary black womanhood. The black leading lady, as I contend, is a rich, complex, and compelling persona, especially as she is represented in the bodies of Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope, and Vera Stark. Moreover, I wholly believe the black leading lady

is just the beginning of a larger wave of imaging that ushers in the nuanced particularities of black women's livelihood across the United States and the world. Through her prominence and acclaim, the black leading lady will continue to demonstrate how and why ascribing value to black womanhood stands as a humanistic imperative.

## Chapter Two: Performing Archetypal (Black) Female Citizenship: First Lady Michelle Obama

“Don’t be yourselves, be who they want you to be.”

– Gil Troy, on advice to First Ladies<sup>20</sup>

“I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. ... I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.”

– Hortense Spillers<sup>21</sup>

On February 9, 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama announced the launch of an unprecedented initiative to address the startling rise of childhood obesity in the United States. Speaking to a large crowd in the State Dining Room of the White House, Michelle Obama outlined a sweeping, four-part proposal to encourage families and children in their efforts to make healthier eating choices and increase physical activity. According to statistics proffered by the First Lady, one in every three children are classified as overweight or obese, a trend that – if continued – would lead many to have shorter life expectancies than their parents. With supporters in the audience ranging from U.S. government cabinet members, to celebrity athletes, leaders in the fields of pediatric medicine and education, along with large food corporations, *Let’s Move!* debuted with the goal of ending childhood obesity within a generation. Backed by a presidential memorandum establishing the first national task force to address concerns associated

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<sup>20</sup> This is according to Robert Watson’s summary of Gil Troy’s advice to first ladies. See Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives*, (215).

<sup>21</sup> Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, (203).



with the growing “epidemic,” the announcement served to mark Michelle Obama’s shift into her first visible policy role within the administration.<sup>22</sup>

As a call to action, *Let’s Move!* builds on the momentum of Michelle Obama’s carefully constructed and purposefully enacted public persona as First Lady since entering the White House. In April 2009, Michelle Obama eased into national discourse about healthy eating when she joined with 23 local elementary school fifth graders on the South Lawn to plant a community garden. While the garden was, in effect, a “simple focus,”<sup>23</sup> her formal position on children’s health articulated through the *Let’s Move!* initiative has proven to be anything but. In fact, on May 28, 2014, the First Lady penned an op-ed for the *New York Times* redirecting attacks against the Obama administration’s efforts to implement policy resetting nutritional standards for school lunches. In a pointed statement, Michelle Obama wrote,

Remember a few years ago when Congress declared that the sauce on a slice of pizza should count as a vegetable in school lunches? You don’t have to be a nutritionist to know that this doesn’t make much sense. Yet we’re seeing the same thing happening again with these new efforts to lower nutrition standards in our schools.”<sup>24</sup>

In an uncharacteristically partisan defense of her platform, the First Lady forcefully confronted conservative Washington bureaucrats determined to stymie initiatives and programs associated with the Obama administration. Her efforts signified not only her

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<sup>22</sup> See Sheryl Stolberg, “Childhood Obesity Battle...” from the *New York Times* on February 10, 2010. Also see Robin Givhan, “Michelle Obama: ‘Let’s Move’ on childhood obesity” from *The Washington Post* on February 10, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Givhan, *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See Michelle Obama. “The Campaign For Junk Food.”

unwavering commitment to the work, but also revealed the exceptional strength of her First Lady pulpit.

As noted in the introduction, Michelle Obama's arrival on the national stage in 2008, alongside her novelty as the first black First Lady, makes her an exemplar black leading lady and a fitting introductory case study for this dissertation project. This chapter focuses on connecting ideologies of citizenship with discourse on black womanhood and black women's subjective experience. As First Lady, Michelle Obama is a symbol of mainstream gendered citizenship but, given her racial identification as a black woman, represents a divergence from the historical precedence of her public role. As a black leading lady, Michelle Obama's visibility and popularity as First Lady warrants critical attention toward thinking about the way ideal citizenship is (re)conceptualized to navigate racial discourse in the United States.

Given this, my work in this chapter explores the myriad ways citizenship factors into the construction of the black leading lady. I argue Michelle Obama embodies what I perceive as archetypal black female citizenship, which I conceptualize as a performance that gives the appearance of adhering to culturally sanctioned and temporally specific precedents of gender norms while carving spaces of resistance. What follows will expand the work of this definition through a close reading of Michelle Obama's launch speech of the *Let's Move!* initiative, drawing in supportive texts as needed. I focus on the First Lady's work with childhood obesity, as opposed to her equally laudable support of military families, due to the campaign's glaring associations with heightened national anxiety. By this, I am attempting to make connections to what appears to me to be an era

of hyper-anxiety. While it may be symptomatic of concentrated media stimulation, I believe attention to childhood obesity (similar to economic stability, student loan debt, the housing market, and medical vaccinations – to name a few) is another articulation of national fear toward an inability to maintain control. As such, the work of this chapter asks: how does performing archetypal black female citizenship allow the black leading lady to veil critiques on race and citizenship from the margins? To answer this question, the focus of this chapter deconstructs the way Michelle Obama, as the exemplar black leading lady, craftily navigates the historical precedents of her office with racist articulations of black womanhood thereby positioning archetypal black female citizenship as a potentially transgressive performance of black femininity in mainstream public spaces.

## **BACKGROUND**

Although first ladies are expected to act as staunch supporters of presidential administrations, those who appear to be too politically involved are often subject to severe public backlash. To date, former First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton remains, arguably, the most divisive first lady in U.S. history. The legacy of her public imaging is intimately tied to national perception of her policy role within the Clinton administration. Building off the “two for the price of one” campaign promise,<sup>25</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton became the first in her position to keep offices in the West Wing of the White House. It was her role as head of President Clinton’s health care reform task force, however, that

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<sup>25</sup> See Robert Watson, *The President’s Wives*, (2005).

led to what many have called lingering and widespread “Hillary-hating” (Gates). It appears as if public resistance toward politically active first ladies, like Hillary Rodham Clinton, often stems from resistance toward the convergence of “traditional” conceptions of femininity and domesticity with masculine constructions of public spaces. Though first ladies since the arrival of Eleanor Roosevelt have comfortably asserted their public role along the lines of social advocacy, such politicking is reserved for issues more easily related to gendered norms. Lacking constitutional parameters to guide increasing public influence of the office of the First Lady requires many presidential spouses to tread a tenuous line between the gendered dichotomy of public and private.<sup>26</sup>

Navigating this expectation takes on heightened significance for Michelle Obama given the symbolism of “First Lady” as a metonym for U.S. womanhood. Historically framed by middle-to-upper class conceptions of white femininity, first ladies are the epitomized embodiment of U.S. female citizenship.<sup>27</sup> As a racialized departure from this historical precedent, multiple media sources reflected public anxiety toward Michelle Obama’s potential transition into this role throughout the early days of Barack Obama’s national campaign for the presidency. One of the most controversial responses appeared

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<sup>26</sup> Concentrated scholarship on the First Lady independent of the presidency developed in the late part of the twentieth century. For germinal work offering a scholarly approach to the office of the first lady, see: Myra G. Gutin, *The President’s Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century* (1989); Lewis Gould, *American First Ladies: Their Lives and Their Legacy* (1996); Carl Anthony Sferazza, *First Ladies: The Saga of the President’s Wives and Their Power, 1789-1961* (1992) *First Ladies: The Saga of the President’s Wives and Their Power, 1961-1990* (1993); Betty Boyd Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama* (2010); Robert Watson, *The Presidents’ Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady* (2000); and Molly Meijer Wertheimer, *Leading Ladies of the White House: Communication Strategies of Twentieth-Century First Ladies* (2005).

<sup>27</sup> For a scholarly approach linking the First Lady with nationality and ideal womanhood, see Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetorical Presidency,” (179-195).

on the front cover of the *New Yorker* in July 2008. For this issue, the monthly magazine featured Michelle Obama in a caricatured rendering with a rifle strapped to her back, sporting an Afro and outfitted in camouflage as a militarized black radical. Pictured in the Oval Office standing next to a depiction of Barack Obama dressed in Islamic religious attire, Michelle Obama is posed giving the President “the fist bump heard round the world” while a U.S. flag burns in the background.<sup>28</sup> At the time of its release, the image – in part – reflected and critiqued public misrecognition of comments offered by Michelle Obama at a speech in Iowa during the Democratic primaries.<sup>29</sup> What I find most telling about the *New Yorker* cover, however, is the way it made explicit the collective fear toward the types of risks posed to the nation should black bodies occupy the White House. Moreover, the distress spotlighted on the cover is one that originated almost exclusively from Michelle Obama’s symbolic role.

Despite a strained introduction to national public service, by the 2009 inauguration, mainstream renderings of Michelle Obama’s persona had almost entirely transformed. Her favorability numbers jumped nearly 25 points, and she has maintained high approval ratings since entering the White House.<sup>30</sup> In March 2009, *The New Yorker* revamped their imaging of the First Lady by featuring her on the cover as the star of her

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<sup>28</sup> The Reliable Source of the *Washington Post* from June 5, 2008 coined this phrase in response to Michelle Obama knocking fists with Barack Obama after he secured the Democratic nomination for President. See, Amy Argetsinger and Roxanne Roberts, “The Fist Couple...”

<sup>29</sup> Michelle Obama is quoted as saying, “For the first time in my adult lifetime I am proud of my country.” Taken with her Princeton thesis, this statement lead many to label Michelle Obama as angry and unpatriotic.

<sup>30</sup> Michelle Obama’s approval scores are higher than that of Hillary Rodham Clinton but still lower than Republican first ladies Barbara Bush and Laura Bush. See Alyssa Brown, “Michelle Obama Maintains Positive Image.”

own runway model show, in three pastel-infused ensembles, and sporting her signature bob. That same month, she became the second first lady to appear on the cover of *Vogue*, making her sophomore appearance as the magazine's featured story in April 2013. While this is just a small sampling of the First Lady's improved relationship with the public, given her difficult start, Michelle Obama's meteoric rise to celebrity status appears almost heroic. In fact, as argued in the introduction, this shift is precisely what incited the very conceptualization of the black leading lady figure.

Not all, however, have championed what has long appeared a tapered down performance of the First Lady's public persona. To these critics, Michelle Obama's mass appeal constricts her to the historically regrettable "lace and crinoline" construction of the First Lady office. In a special forum on Michelle Obama that appeared in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, cultural critic and black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers laments that what was once a "dizzying dazzle of spectacle" has been "handled [and] softened" for the service of the national (i.e., white) stage. This "re-choreography," as Spillers suggests, mitigates any impulse for the audience to attend to Michelle Obama's unprecedented self-authoring via a black female standpoint (308). While I agree with much of Spillers's observation, I am decidedly less dismayed. Though these comments were offered shortly after the 2008 presidential election, I find them to be reflective of a more pervasive and lingering suspicion toward the Obamas' pro-black politics. The First Lady's popularity raises consideration for how blackness can operate at the center of mainstream interests while maintaining critical awareness of and association with historically anti-black racisms. From my vantage, Michelle Obama's brazen op-ed in the

*New York Times* is just a sample illustration of how this is done. In fact, I view the First Lady's necessarily strategic repositioning in service of the nation as a critical entry point into interrogating how the black leading lady's enactment of citizenship can work to expose the seams of hegemonic nationality. What follows will offer a closer examination of the conceptual frames that inform this line of argumentation.

### **ARCHETYPAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE BLACK LEADING LADY**

Before delving into the contours of Michelle Obama's distinct enactment of archetypal black female citizenship, it is necessary to explore the concept's taxonomy. I derive this term from the convergence of three disparate conceptualizations: "archetypal," "black female," and "citizenship." I am drawn to the imagery of the archetype for its symbolic representation across cultures and temporalities. Archetypes structure patterns of identification: they function as a site of familiarity and a location of elusiveness. In other words, to audience an archetype is to recognize how the image is both identifiable and operates as a symbol of idealism, always just out of reach. Archetypes, paradoxically, fulfill the function of being both generalizable and definitive. They are positioned to navigate multiple constituencies fluidly and non-controversially. An archetype adheres to the broadest range of appeal while representing an exemplar manifestation.

As such, the role of First Lady lends itself readily to archetypal associations. In form and in function, first ladies embody paradigmatic qualities. According to first lady scholar Robert Watson, presidential spouses epitomize this association by being widely varied in personality, distinction, and approach to the office while seeming to share

“generic challenges, experiences, and activities” (25). As an archetype, Michelle Obama embodies a representative and prototypical public persona. It is worth mentioning here that prototype is subsumed under the umbrella of archetype. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a prototype is defined as the original upon which other models are patterned. An archetype, on the other hand, is a perfect example. Even as Michelle Obama is the *first* black First Lady, thereby lending her position readily to a prototypical understanding, I employ the descriptor archetype, however, to gesture toward the way Michelle Obama performs to the criterion of her office, which has already been established as the ideal.

When taken as an embodied praxis, this attention to precedence allows the archetype to draw considerable connections to concepts of mimesis and performance with the black leading lady figure. As evidence by Germaine Greer, who flippantly refers to first ladies as the “archetypal lipstick-skirt-high heels next to the archetypal suit” (“Abolish Her” 21), mimetic embodiment heavily informs analysis of the first lady. To echo feminist theatre scholar, Elin Diamond, I situate performance in my exploration of archetypal black female citizenship and First Lady Michelle Obama because I take as a given that “representation and socio-historical reality are fully imbricated” (*Unmaking Mimesis* iii). The “truth” about U.S. womanhood that is projected by the First Lady to the public and performatively reenacted by the women who occupy its role is a direct reflection of the discourse out of which this imaging emerges.

Turning to a study conducted by Shawn Parry-Giles and Diane Blair on the rhetorical performance of first ladies helps further the basis for grounding analysis of



archetypal black female citizenship in performance. Their work provides a genealogical survey of the ways in which first ladies employ rhetorical strategies in an effort to advance personal or presidential administrative agendas (567). According to Parry-Giles and Blair, what they identify as the “rhetorical first lady” patterns her persuasive techniques off those of her predecessors, which are often constrained by temporally specified gendered conventions. Although Parry-Giles and Blair contend that “the first lady pulpit...act[s] as a site for the performance of archetypal femininity” (567), much of the article employs performance language merely as a means of explaining rhetorical practices. By drawing explicitly on mimesis and performance, I attempt to locate the body as a site of analysis for first lady scholarship. In this way, the archetypal performance referenced by Parry-Giles and Blaire extends beyond discursive constructions and enactments. Much of Michelle Obama’s success as a black leading lady is determined not only by how she patterns her predecessor’s speeches but also in how she gestures toward well-received public performances of femininity and, as I reveal later in the chapter, how she bravely defies these boundaries.

My attention toward the performance and embodiment of archetypal black female citizenship in relationship to Michelle Obama also addresses how blackness is resituated as representative of U.S. nationality. Generally, lack of racial acknowledgement is viewed in the United States as a “graceful, even generous liberal gesture” (Morrison 9-10). To activate the substance of black female citizenship is to resist historic erasures of black visibility within the national imaginary. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imaginative*, author Toni Morrison outlines the trope of Africanism in U.S.

literature and the ways (non)presence is directly tied to the construction of the U.S. body politic. As Morrison asserts, the signification of “Africanism” stems out of European “misreadings” of black people in an effort to “inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on... a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, [as well as] desire and fear” (7). What Morrison goes on to expound is that for the purposes of the State, this calculated construction of Africanism through distancing and absence lays the very foundation for the operation of the “new cultural hegemony” through whiteness (8). As reflected in the opening epigraph by Hortense Spillers, the role of black women in the United States is historically inscribed as a degraded servant to State. In fact, as Melissa Harris-Perry aptly affirms, the condition of black womanhood is such that “black women are rarely recognized as archetypal citizens” (20). Given the status of first lady as the symbol of U.S. womanhood, and in light of the way U.S. national identity developed out of erasure of the Africanist presence, Michelle Obama’s embodiment of the first lady role requires attention to the ways absence is now *representative* of mainstream femininity. As a black leading lady, Michelle Obama is archetypal because – by adhering to the generalized understanding of first lady comportment– she now sets the standard for conceptualizing black women’s citizenship. In other words, the once threatening black (female) body now serves as the promise of perfect civil participation.

Taken together, “black female” and “citizenship” inform how the black leading lady operates within the boundaries of U.S. nationality and State recognition. The purpose of a nation is to provide a frame within which individuals can establish historical, spatial, and ideological claims to citizenship. The taut history of blacks in the

United States makes this reclamation process difficult if not impossible at the expense of egregious historical erasures, especially for black women. In fact, one of the country's early landmark court cases, which effectively crystallized black disenfranchisement, involved a black female slave's claim to legal protection from the law. As written by historian Melton McLaurin in *Celia, A Slave*, Celia went to trial in the mid-1800s for killing her master after enduring several years of sexual abuse and giving birth to two of his biological children. At the age of 19, Celia was hanged because – as a slave – she was property and could not assert any legal claim to having been raped or sexually assaulted. If Celia had been found innocent of murder, the court's ruling would not only have diminished white women's social and legal stature but would have also imbued all slaves with State recognition as citizens. Establishing Michelle Obama as an archetypal citizen within this context raises serious consideration for the type of historical amnesia present in her emergence as a black leading lady. In fact, her manifestation as a First Lady is premised on the suggestion that this country's violent grievances against the racially marginalized, especially black Americans, has been forgiven or – at the very least – dismissed. Therein rests the constitutive complication of *(In)valuable (In)visibility*: how are black women, let alone black people, instilled with a sense of social worth within a mainstream modality founded on their immateriality?

Given this, what I would like to suggest is that the archetype is paradoxical. In many ways, paradox is inherently imbued into the role of the First Lady. First lady scholar Karrin Vasby Anderson claims the element of paradox enables first ladies to interrupt media informed gender dichotomies of public/private in an effort to assert their

individual agency. As Anderson goes on to explain, this paradox reveals itself through a type of social style that allows first ladies to move between the complexity of a gendered role that requires them to be both properly contained and on display (“First Lady”). From this vantage, it makes sense to conceive of First Lady Michelle Obama as both “conformist and revolutionary” (White 13). As a black leading lady, Michelle Obama’s performance of archetypal black female citizenship reassures mainstream (i.e., white) constituents that blackness can be both contained *and* recognizable to the extent of hegemonic constraints. The black leading lady presents black womanhood to the public in ways that foreclose social transgression along racial boundaries (i.e., contained) yet offers a point of social connection (i.e., recognizable and on display). Yet, she does so while maintaining associations with significations of blackness, thereby aiding her resistive approach. What follows will expand on the details of this definitional position through a close reading of the *Let’s Move!* initiative launch. Specifically, I attend to the way in which Michelle Obama employs notions of homeplace, autonomous partnership, and diva citizenship to navigate gendered, raced, heteronormative, and historical antecedents while enacting a performance of cultural resistance.

### **WHITE HOUSE, BLACK HOME**

The official launch of the *Let’s Move!* campaign occurred on a blistering cold winter morning inside the State Dining Room of the White House. Entering into analysis of archetypal black female citizenship through the State Dining Room is an effective way to address the dialogical relationship between space and bodies. If this work is to give

serious consideration for the black leading lady as an archetypal black female citizen, attention must be paid to the stage that frames this reading of Michelle Obama's specialized performance. The State Dining Room is symbolically relevant for several reasons. First, the State Dining Room spatially mimics the public/private conflation assumed in the First Lady's domestically inclined position as a public figure. Yet, as the physical site of Michelle Obama's signature campaign, the State Dining Room acts as the institutionally sanctioned symbol of domiciliary interests.

It is important to note, however, that the announcement of *Let's Move!* was originally scheduled to take place at THEARC, a town hall arts and recreation center committed to community revitalization located in southeast Washington D.C. An impending blizzard, unfortunately, threatened to leave many attendees stranded thus prompting a late change in venue by event organizers. THEARC is based in Ward 8 of Washington D.C., a neighborhood predominantly comprised of black families.<sup>31</sup> While an invitation to the White House would seem to lend itself to heightened prestige, there were those in attendance who felt the change in location dampened the community effect of the initiative's cause. In fact, Robin Givhan, a reporter from the *Washington Post*, claimed the new setting stripped the event of its "warmth and informality."<sup>32</sup> From this vantage, the State Dining Room became subsumed by the stringency of the White House as a

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<sup>31</sup> For more information, visit Neighborhood Info DC, funded by the Urban Institute: [http://www.neighborhoodinfodc.org/wards/nbr\\_prof\\_wrd8.html](http://www.neighborhoodinfodc.org/wards/nbr_prof_wrd8.html).

<sup>32</sup> Givhan prefaces her comment by claiming, "The State Dining Room, with its portrait of Lincoln, as the backdrop was grander and more official than the we're-all-in-this-together nature of the event." For more, see Givhan, "First Lady Michelle Obama...."

politically sanctioned public space, rather than the ease and comfort of a private home or, in the case of THEARC, a space for community engagement.

The commentary featured in the *Washington Post* is peculiar both in the way it implicates the public/private dichotomy of the White House, and in how veiled racial signifiers are immediately attached to the space and to the bodies in attendance, particularly those identified as the focus of the event. The State Dining Room once served as President Thomas Jefferson's private office but has been widely known as the official site of State hospitality since Andrew Jackson's presidency. Photographs often highlight the room's 18th century neoclassical décor, including a fireplace that features a painting of President Abraham Lincoln hanging over the mantle.<sup>33</sup> Video recording of the *Let's Move!* launch posted on the official White House website obscures much of this history: the camera showcases only a few drapes drawn closed over the windows, along with a single candlelight chandelier. Though mostly cut out of the video, the seated audience appears tightly packed. A young girl, Tammy Nguyen, stands at the podium with a blue-screened television positioned behind her. She is flanked on both sides by former NFL player Tiki Barber and the Watkins Hornets (a championship youth football team from Washington D.C.) to her left, along with First Lady Michelle Obama to her right. There is a very clear and obvious juxtaposition between the seeming formality of the room as a space for entertaining state dignitaries and the lack of formality elicited by the bodies of color upon which the camera's gaze is directed. In fact, the aforementioned

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<sup>33</sup> Information about the State Dining Room's history and décor is gleaned from the White House Historical Association website: <http://www.whitehousehistory.org/history/white-house-facts-trivia/tour-state-dining-room.html>.

reporter actually credits the Watkins Hornets, who are featured sitting prominently throughout Michelle Obama's thirty-minute address, with recovering much of the community spirit displaced by the White House's structural formality.

While it is a slippery maneuver to employ black children's bodies as surrogates for informality, it is an association that draws attention to the way racially marked bodies re-structure how the White House is read as a publicly moderated domestic space.<sup>34</sup> In fact, this supposition performs critical work in framing the way Michelle Obama's opening address to the audience makes visible the type of resistive potential available through the enactment of archetypal black female citizenship. Recalling that archetypal black female citizenship is paradoxical in the way it reaffirms hegemonic standards while simultaneously undermining its operation, the First Lady's introduction both supports and interrupts the ceremonial pretense established by the structure of the State Dining Room. After being welcomed to the podium by Ms. Nguyen, one of the middle-school students who had participated in planting the White House garden in 2009, Michelle Obama rises from her seat among the Watkins Hornets. She thanks the audience for their applause and then states, "It is a thrill to have you all here in my home." With this simple utterance, the audience is no longer seated in the State-recognized formal space for entertaining government officials and politicians. In fact, the White House ceases to be identified as even the public space of – and for – "the people." Rather, through a clear and direct claim

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<sup>34</sup> Considering the way children come to stand metaphorically as a symbol of innocence, juxtaposed against the pickaninny as the stereotype that fuels historically inhumane treatment of black children, the reference to informality implies that black children should not be taken seriously.

of “home,” the First Lady’s welcome reframes the White House into a personalized space of decisive authority.

In restructuring the White House into “home,” Michelle Obama situates blackness in a way that reorients not only her own positionality to the nation but the audience’s as well. In light of the *Washington Post* reporter’s observation, the opening of the *Let’s Move!* launch recording directs the gaze of the (presumably) mostly non-black audience at the stage filled with bodies of color. When the First Lady takes the podium and claims the space as “home,” however, the official White House patrons and partners in the fight against childhood obesity are transformed into invited guests. In this way, the assumed political-business meeting between the First Lady, government officials, executives, foundation board members and the press ceases to be a privileged gathering of decision makers. Michelle Obama’s racially marked body makes claim to the space as “home” and implies that their responsibility is to maintain the integrity of her goodwill. Moreover, as this reading suggests, it is the First Lady’s declaration of “home” that actually does the work of recovering the innocence and vulnerability of the children who are seated behind her. The fortuitous change in venue allows Michelle Obama to assert the protective affect of “home” as a metaphorical shield against the potential political threats assumed by those in the audience who are authorized by the State and capitalist interests. The black leading lady, therefore, is positioned as a defense against those whose authority has historically undermined the safety of all black bodies, including children. More importantly, she does so by appropriating the institutional fortitude of the White House.



This reorientation of the First Lady vis-à-vis the rhetoric of “home” suggests a decidedly black feminist energy inherent in enacting archetypal black female citizenship. As noted in the introduction, the black leading lady is necessarily informed by black feminist ideology in the way she energizes community and connectedness. The opening to Barbara Smith’s edited anthology of black feminist writing, *Home Girls*, offers a useful entrance into the critical work of this reading. Declaring boldly, “There is nothing more important to me than home,” Smith presents a detailed description of her relationship to the physicality of house compared to the affect of home (xix). For Smith, the rhetorical and ideological difference between house and home rests in the way the latter attends to a structure of feeling. As she begins her description of “house,” she sketches her memory of placement: the kitchen where she ate, the daybed where her mother slept, its physical location in a Cleveland ghetto, and its distance from the church. Shifting her attention to “home,” however, Smith accesses a decidedly feminine space grounded in hard work, faithfulness to blood roots and spiritual beliefs, and a committed practice to thinking toward a “future beyond” the present circumstances (xxi).

From this vantage, the call to “home” by Michelle Obama demonstrates how performing archetypal black female citizenship restructures black women’s relationships to domestic spaces within the national cultural imaginary. Though black women and domestic work are prevalently linked to cultural stereotypes like the mammy, the domestic sphere is not exclusively a space of exploitation and subjugation. In fact, for many black women, the home acts as a site of resistance and self-recovery. Cultural critic bell hooks identifies this perspective as “homeplace” and describes it as the space “where

one [can] freely confront the issue of humanization” (*Yearning* 42). This exploration of homeplace, similar to Michelle Obama’s self-positioning to the White House as “home,” blurs the line between “house” as publically-sanctioned, privately-owned property and home crafted through psychic renderings. Another way of viewing this distinction is to think about the house as a physicality that must be purchased while home is a space that must be individually and personally cultivated. This is an important reminder, given a) the economic, material, and structural limitations that have historically plagued black Americans’ access to housing in the United States; and b) the way the White House has long-operated as a contentious site for making claims to nation as an ideological home for those it has purported to exclude.

By rhetorically restructuring the physical White House into a personal (psychic) “home” and drawing on black feminist interventionist techniques, Michelle Obama’s performance of archetypal black female citizenship asserts two modes of resistance: direct address and anecdote. Direct address is first witnessed when Michelle Obama turns to Tammy immediately after her welcome:

And I want to thank Tammy, oh, I could just start crying, you’re so sweet. And so smart, and you’ve gotten so tall. You’re on your game, girl. Thank you for that wonderful introduction and for all your outstanding work. I mean it’s important, Tammy, for you to know how much you and your classmates have all played a role in where we are today. Look at this room! Look at all these important people with cameras and lights, and it’s because of what you helped me start at the White House garden.

The First Lady angles her body to position herself in a direct line to Tammy, who sits in the front row. She brings her hands together in the form of applause and holds them as she implores Tammy to recognize the importance of the work she and her classmates

have performed. Her clasped hands cut through the air in short, pointed movements as she punctuates each word between “important” and “classmates.” She then opens her arms to draw in the rest of the crowd. By articulating Tammy’s direct engagement in planting the community garden as the catalyst for subsequent political action, the First Lady positions children as critical agents of change. In drawing on tenets of home and homeplace, Michelle Obama’s instantiation of archetypal black female citizenship restructures the public space of the White House as a personal space of resistance.

In addition to direct address, archetypal black female citizenship is crafted as a performance that draws on the use of anecdote. In particular, one of the special conditions of home rhetoric and homeplace is the way anecdote is incorporated and received as legitimated epistemology. Conceptions of home are generally articulated through personal and affective memory. Often, it is the story that shapes the ideology, which, subsequently, informs an individual’s approach to home. Support for this can be gleaned from performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison who weds bell hooks’ concept of homeplace to Gloria Anzaldua’s “theory of the flesh.” As Madison contends, “theories of the flesh” offer “distinctive interpretations of the world [which] are carved out of the embodied, historical, and material reality of a group’s life experiences” (“That Was” 229). When these significations of self are shared orally the political effects are magnified. Madison’s work demonstrates how personal narrative and oral history are unique black feminist methods for validating the individual experiences of black and marginalized women. It is through the act of sharing stories that marginalized others are provided a sense of agency and the ability to speak on their own terms. In the telling of

one's story, individuals move away from monolithic, essentialized constructions of group identity to "own," as Madison says, one's experience.

In this way, Michelle Obama's employment of anecdote throughout the *Let's Move!* initiative launch reinforces how the black leading lady performs archetypal black female citizenship as a simultaneously conformist and resistive practice. As first lady scholar Karlyn Kohrs Campbell contends, regularly drawing on anecdote fulfills the tenets of what she identifies as a feminine rhetorical style. According to Campbell, the feminine rhetorical style is a carefully enacted response by first ladies who must attend to the discursively maintained gendered norms for femininity as well as the "rhetorical competencies" of male-informed public governance. Campbell goes on to assert that the performance of femininity within a public frame is maintained through: self-disclosure; embodying a feminine or non-gendered persona (such as a mediator or a prophet); employing arguments that are crafted through inductive reasoning and supported through anecdotal evidence; and, "appropriating strategies associated with women – such as domestic metaphors, emotional appeals to motherhood, and the like" (5). Campbell maintains that appealing to femininely informed discourse does not forestall delivery of structurally sound speeches. Rather, this style lends itself to a more positive reception from interested publics and is critical for the public comportment of first ladies.

Michelle Obama launches into a feminine rhetorical style almost immediately after her extensive introductions at the start of her speech. She begins by linking her concern for the welfare of children in the United States to her gender-informed public persona as mother to the nation.

We're all here today because we care deeply about the health and well being of not just these kids up here, but for all kids like them all across the country. And clearly, we're determined to finally take on one of the most serious threats to their future, and that's the epidemic of childhood obesity in America today. And obviously, it's an issue of great concern to me, not just as a First Lady, but as a mother.

By emphasizing national motherhood, Michelle Obama affirms her adherence to the gendered prescriptions required of a feminine rhetorical style vis-à-vis the role of First Lady. Alternately, attending to her personalized role as mother to her own children reinforces the historic novelty of black women's claims to motherhood. Even as she moves to discuss data that supports obesity as a growing issue of concern, she never veers from asserting a feminine acumen. In fact, her citation of the statistics related to childhood obesity is framed as a simple reiteration. The First Lady attributes the initial relay of statistical data to former NFL player, Tiki Barber. As she explains, her recitation of the numerical facts is offered as a point of reinforcement. In doing so, she downplays any potential perception of being non-feminine or threatening by attributing the source of data, with its masculine codifications, to a prominent male figure.

As Michelle Obama continues her call to action, she builds on her employment of a feminine rhetorical style via anecdote to further insert blackness into the visual narrative of U.S. life. She begins by smartly redirecting the story to the adults in the room. "To understand where we have to go, we have to know how we got here." She asks the adults seated in front of her to close their eyes and "just think back" as she sets the scene of yearning for a return to their own days as children. She then inserts herself into

the guided reflection where claims about the collective past are supported by her own anecdotal evidence:

Like many of you, when I was young, we walked to school, everyday rain or shine. And in Chicago, it was in the wind, sleet, snow, and hail. We were out there. You remember how at school we had to have recess? Had to have it, you had to have gym. We spent hours running around outside when school got out. You couldn't even go inside until it was time for dinner. And then, in so many households, we would gather around the table for dinner as a family.

Inserting racialized black subjectivity into collective nostalgia reinforces how the performance of archetypal black female citizenship resists being subsumed by narratives of white normativity. Michelle Obama draws on the colloquial construction of “the good ol’ days” (i.e., “we walked to school, everyday rain or shine”) and adds her own specific articulation of its memory (i.e., “And in Chicago, it was the wind, sleet, snow, and hail”). With etymological origins in “homesickness,” theoretical renderings of nostalgia locate the term within the realm of sentiment, aesthetic patterning or mode of production (Davis). Paul Grainge offers nostalgia as a type of “memory [politic] of stylized pastness” (6) that contributes to cultural and national identification vis-à-vis specialized remembrance. Michelle Obama’s call to Chicago is a specific reference to the city’s South Side, a region commonly associated with its black residents. What she does in this particular moment, therefore, is to draw from a well-employed narrative of U.S. nationality to (re)situate her experience and, by proxy, her blackness. The family of her narrative – though rhetorically non-racially specific – is reimagined to necessarily include the racial identities and experiences of those who do not fit easily into dominant discourse.

Throughout this guided reflection, the First Lady's performance of archetypal black female citizenship continues to blur the distinction between culturally hegemonic narratives and specialized articulations of black subjective experience. Sharing her memories around the dinner table, the First Lady states, "In my household, as in many, there was one simple rule: you ate what was on your plate: good, bad or ugly." A hearty laugh is drawn from the audience and acts as a point of familiarity shared between the children and adults. At this point, Michelle Obama departs from the present-day collective to specify her particularly working class origins. She explains to the audience that her family dined at fast food restaurants on rare occasions. Not only were these outings considered a "big treat," but even desserts and sugary food were limited to Sundays. In a critical moment of the speech, the First Lady makes a reference to her family's socioeconomic status: "And in my home, we weren't rich. The foods weren't fancy, but there was always a vegetable on the plate, and we managed to lead pretty healthy lives." In doing so, Michelle Obama interrupts the call for (white) hegemonic nostalgia by citing her decidedly black working-class roots. This is a gesture she reemploys soon after outlining the seemingly impossible disadvantages many children face today, most notably those who are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds: concerns about safety means that being outdoors is a physical threat to the body; the effects of modernity – the Internet, television, and video games – have altered how children play. She explains that as food costs have risen, accessibility to non-processed food can be scarce, and with parents working multiple jobs, basic access to monetary resources or time is frequently an obstacle.

By addressing the realities many families face, Michelle Obama demonstrates how the black leading lady's performance of archetypal black female citizenship complicates her racialized body's narrative congruity with the symbol of the White House as a national structure of promise and prosperity. She can empathize with national anxiety over trying to "get it right" because, as she assures, she has "been there." Moreover, Michelle Obama freely expresses gratitude for and acknowledgment of her privilege even while maintaining ties to disenfranchisement. In this way, I view Michelle Obama's call within the *Let's Move!* campaign as quietly critiquing neoliberal rhetoric that would otherwise place responsibility for a child's well-being on individual families and parental units. As Michelle Obama goes on to explain:

Look, I live in a wonderful house, and today I am blessed with more help and support than I could have ever imagined. But I didn't always live in the White House, and it wasn't that long ago that I was a working mom – I've shared this story – struggling [to balance] meetings and deadlines, and soccer and ballet.

The simple clause, "I've shared this story," is almost offered as an after sight but functions as a critical reminder that the "home" she claims is not the home from which she belongs. "I've shared this story" evokes a deep sense of understanding that her present position as First Lady, as a black leading lady, and as a woman with access to the resources many families struggle to acquire is merely circumstantial.

While the black leading lady is restricted in the types of critiques that can be made against structural systems that work to further displace and marginalize the poor/working-class (who are often people of color), there remains a limit to how much she works in service of the neoliberal agenda. Michelle Obama's ability to situate herself



into the narrative of U.S. nostalgia is a demonstration of how this works. In fact, I believe Michelle Obama's ability to slip into the neoliberal majority from a visual position on the margins is one of the more effective rhetorical devices that she regularly engages. The Obamas routinely mask their incredible wealth and access to material resources.<sup>35</sup> While the First Lady may have grown up on the South Side of Chicago, and even though her ancestors have direct ties to U.S. slavery, before entering the White House, she and her husband drew in nearly \$400,000 a year in annual income. This is not offered as a discrediting critique so much as it is a recognition of the way her marked and recalled ties to blackness and labor enable her to slip into the "collective" in ways that other first ladies have not. This slippage is, perhaps, the most compelling trait of the black leading lady and, by proxy, Michelle Obama. It is as if the First Family is able to distance themselves from association with the social elite by very nature of the narrative that their marked skin incites. The overdetermined construction of black bodies enables an easier reading of their personal adversity.

#### **AUTONOMOUS PARTNERSHIPS AND BLACK HETEROSEXUAL UNIONS**

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal black female citizenship intentionally maneuvers between representative U.S. femininity and racialized expressions of this norm that operate as an act of resistance. Given this, one of the primary navigations explored by the First Lady's specialized

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<sup>35</sup> A recent *Parade* magazine article from June 22, 2014 mentioned how the President drove a used car he purchased for \$1000 for the first five years of their marriage. He also discussed how he and Michelle's student loan payments were higher than their mortgage.

performance rests with contemporaneous expectations of women in leadership positions to continue to uphold tenets of the ideal family. For this argument, I assume the following: first, the black leading lady, and thereby archetypal black female citizenship, is intimately tied to heteronormative values and appearances; second, embracing the trope of the “American family” enables marginalized Others to be enfolded into the U.S. body politic; finally, prevailing conceptions of black women’s deviancy must be continually undermined within the models of heteronormativity and the nuclear family in order for the black leading lady to assume influence in mainstream public spaces. Given this, Michelle Obama’s visible and widely embraced policy position via the *Let’s Move!* campaign prompts consideration for how the First Lady adheres to gendered and familial precedence with a flair of autonomy distinguishable from the president. As such, the work of this section addresses how the black leading lady, as an archetypal black female citizen, helps to reframe conceptions of heterosexual partnership.

Despite the presence of Michelle and Barack Obama on the national stage as a unified, supportive and structurally sound family unit, the First Lady has been forced to persistently resist accusations of deviancy within her familial role. When she first entered the national spotlight, she did so as “Mom-in-Chief” marking her public persona as that of mother to her two children, Malia and Sasha.<sup>36</sup> This reclamation of motherhood is considered a decidedly radical act among black feminists given the number of black women who have been forced to place personal mothering as secondary to the needs of

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<sup>36</sup> The term “Mom-in-Chief” was coined a cover story on Michelle Obama featured in *Ebony* magazine in September 2008. See Harriette Cole, “The Real Michelle Obama.”

the white families for whom they worked.<sup>37</sup> Those who do view the First Lady's claim to motherhood as retrograde to progressive feminism do so primarily from a limited, mainstream (i.e., white), second-wave feminist perspective. Their position often lacks attention to the intersection of race and class within gendered norms when criticizing Michelle Obama's reluctance to highlight her education and financially lucrative career prior to the Obamas' tenure in the White House.

In claiming "Mom-in-Chief," however, Michelle Obama has crafted a connective link to mothering that not only makes her legible as First Lady from a conventionally gendered perspective but also sets up her autonomous performance of archetypal black female citizenship. This position is upheld in two ways. First, the claim to "Mom-in-Chief" effectively minimizes Barack Obama's contribution to the nurturance of their family unit. From this vantage, the President can be viewed as a supportive figure while the First Lady assumes responsibility for the family's successful operation. This point is supported in the way both Michelle and Barack Obama have acknowledged the First Lady's primacy in raising their children with little help from the President as he built his political career.<sup>38</sup> Second, because Michelle Obama's primary role ("Mom-in-Chief") is perceived as a specialized, albeit assumed, gendered construction, she is afforded the opportunity to stand symbolically independent from her husband. The First Lady claims her position to mother and is immediately perceived by the public to "naturally" uphold

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<sup>37</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Women and Motherhood," (187-215) in *Black Feminist Thought* for an overview of black mothering.

<sup>38</sup> For more on Barack Obama's candid disclosure on his and Michelle's parenting roles, see Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 410-415.

her role as dutiful wife. In fact, the image of presidential spouse as a committed companion is a frequently overlooked role in first lady scholarship (Watson 73). The partnership between the president and first lady is so pervasive that emphasizing gendered roles of the family is considered unnecessary. In this way, I contend Michelle Obama structures archetypal black female citizenship as a “together but separate” model for middle-class heteronormative families. In doing so, the First Lady begins to push against the gendered strictures of conformity required within nuclear families.

Moving through the content of the *Let's Move!* launch speech offers telling evidence for Michelle Obama's autonomy in her performance of archetypal black female citizenship. Recalling that archetypal black female citizenship adheres to precedent while enacting resistance, my supposition of autonomous partnering is not meant to suggest that Michelle Obama is structuring a new model of partnership for the First Couple. Rather, what interests me is how Michelle Obama's enactment of autonomous partnership in her performance of archetypal black female citizenship reshapes the way the public conceptualizes black heterosexual relationships via the nuclear family. Despite the *Let's Move!* initiative's obvious association with executive policy and governmental support, Michelle Obama is well into her speech before any acknowledgment of the President occurs. Distancing herself from the President appears to be as much about eliciting bipartisan support as it is about emphasizing her strategic performance as an autonomous partner. In fact, throughout her address, she offers the issue of childhood obesity as a decidedly nonpartisan cause. Michelle Obama moves to intentionally depoliticize the White House and congressional involvement by asserting, “There is nothing democratic

or republican, liberal or conservative about doing what is best for our kids. And I haven't spoken to one expert about this issue who has said that the solution is having government telling people what to do." Anticipating that *Let's Move!* would necessarily incite controversial perceptions of big government oversight, the First Lady smartly connects White House participation through her intimate relationship with the President. As she explains, "We kicked off the [*Let's Move!*] initiative this morning in my husband's office when he signed a presidential memorandum [for] the first ever government wide task force on childhood obesity." The simple reference to "my husband's office" positions the President's involvement as a supportive domestic partner. In fact, after signing the memorandum into effect, the President is recorded joking, "It's done, honey."<sup>39</sup>

Though scholars of first ladies have frequently argued for examining the presidency as a "two-person career,"<sup>40</sup> the partnership of Michelle Obama and Barack Obama takes on added significance given their union as a black heterosexual couple. Successful marriages between black women and men have received minimal visibility in the dominant cultural imaginary. In fact, one of the most prolific renderings of black heterosexual love appeared as a fictional representation in the 1980s sitcom, *The Cosby Show*. Bell hooks contends there has been so much discussion of the significance of the black *family* that little attention has been paid toward black heterosexual partnerships, particularly through the frame of love. She argues that, historically, positive unions

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<sup>39</sup> Footage of this moment can be found on the official White House government website. Visit: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/tackling-childhood-obesity>.

<sup>40</sup> See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetorical Presidency," (179-195) for her exploration of the first lady and president as a "two-person career;" and Robert Watson, *The Presidents' Wives*, for his examination into the presidential partnership model (29).

between black women and black men are viewed as a threat to white supremacist control over black bodies (*Salvation* 155-56). This has a direct link to the slave trade and general disregard toward and denial of heterosexual unions and the creation of black families due to forced separation. Hooks goes on to explain that contemporary renderings of black heterosexual partnerships often suffer from the constraints of sexist gender roles that perceive black female strength and independence within a relationship as a direct threat to black masculinity.

This simple reference (i.e., “in my husband’s office”) suggests a careful acknowledgment of the tenuous balance between Michelle Obama’s independence and Barack Obama’s masculinity. Even the President’s playful response to signing the memorandum, “It’s done, honey” can be read as playing into sexist and gendered expectations of the “placating-but-powerful” husband. There are, however, two critical points to note. First, “in my husband’s office” is the *only* reference the First Lady makes to Barack Obama through an intimate frame. Additionally, her slight gesture to their domestic partnership can be read as working primarily to distance her platform from its sanctioning as a government-initiative. In other words, the campaign was not initiated in the *president’s* office; it originated in her *husband’s* office. From this vantage, Michelle Obama does not need Barack Obama’s presidential title to substantiate her authority. Rather, the singular reference to the president, as a *romantic* partner, placed in the middle of the speech implies the First Lady is, in fact, operating publically on a more self-determining scale.

In a way, Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal black female citizenship demonstrates how black heterosexual romantic relationships operate through autonomous partnering. The way I conceptualize autonomous partnership is best reflected in an observation made by journalist André Leon Talley who penned Michelle Obama's groundbreaking March 2009 *Vogue* article: "You can tell from the way Michelle teases Barack in interviews, the way she's not afraid to disagree publicly, that although she loves her husband, she isn't in awe of him. ... They have maintained their autonomy and mutual respect yet clearly delight in each other's company" (434). Linguistically, the term autonomous partnership is oxymoronic, but as a stylistic and embodied practice, autonomous partnership honors individuality within shared commitments. I consider autonomous partnership a progressive approach to the gender dynamics of romantic partnerships. Moreover, autonomous partnering, particularly within the parameters of black heterosexuality, enables black leading ladies – specifically – to occupy a mutually supportive space alongside a black male partner without the appearance of normative deviancy. By this, I mean to suggest that autonomous partnerships disrupt the mutually exclusive binaries established within black heterosexual romantic relationships that position the woman as either conventionally submissive or deficiently domineering. Autonomous partnering may, in fact, answer the call put forth by bell hooks for black men and women to foster relationships "where everyone's needs can be met, where there can be mutual understanding and satisfaction" (*Salvation* 176).

The physical comportment of the black leading lady via autonomous partnering and the performance of archetypal black female citizenship can be seen in the First

Lady's style alone. In physical form, Michelle Obama stands at the podium resplendent in a teal dress that stops just past her knees. She wears a matching three-quarter sleeve cardigan unbuttoned just enough to allow deeper blue ruffles to be exposed at the top. Over her heart rests a flower pin composed of a silver rose design and teal petals. Her hair is styled in her signature bob, parted on the left side of her head and swooping just slightly over her right eye. Her makeup accentuates her features through a "natural" aesthetic: her eyebrows are thinly lined; there is a slight pink to her cheeks, while her eyes stand out brightly with her eyelids painted in highlights rather than in shadows. Her lipstick is flesh-toned with a hint of sheen. Everything about her presentation is soft and minimal. Interestingly enough, the color of the dress is a "throwback" to the one she wore while speaking at the 2008 Democratic National Convention; the rose pin is the exact same. The 2008 DNC speech catapulted Michelle Obama into worldwide fame. There is important symbolism associated with the fact that for her first official policy position, she evokes the color that launched her onto the national stage. She is performatively activating the same softness, warmth, and inclusionary rhetoric incited by her stunning speech in 2008, a speech fashioned to broaden her appeal. In fact, the costuming of her *Let's Move!* speech provides a visual reminder of the hope and the call to action she first elicited. What is different in this moment is that her initial presentation sought to advocate for the work of her husband; in this particular launch, she stands alone.

This partnering between Michelle and Barack Obama can be further supported within the broader language of her launch. In addition to deemphasizing their intimate relationship, the First Lady restricts direct reference to the presidency to only twice



within the entirety of the speech. In fact, it is only when Michelle Obama reaches the fourth and final objective of the *Let's Move!* initiative that she explicitly joins her call to action to presidential influence. In an effort to encourage physical activity of children, the fourth part of the initiative seeks to increase the number of students who participate in the President's Physical Fitness Challenge as well as increase the number of children who receive the Presidential Active Lifestyle award. Interestingly enough, this last direct reference to the presidency is not on the office at all. The First Lady, instead, promotes the influence of professional athletes, "a dozen different leagues – including the NFL, Major League Baseball, all the WNBA" as presiding over these promotional efforts "through sports clinics [and] public service announcements." The partnering, in this instance, positions the President as only a minor figure within the larger picture. Taken in conjunction with the concept of a black leading lady, autonomous partnering can be seen as offering a platform for asserting black womanhood, specifically, as integral to broader social improvement.

Moreover, archetypal black female citizenship destabilizes temporality to craft an adaptable model for subsequent enactments of this specialized performance for future black first ladies, or other recognizably visible and popular black women in various publics who would be identified as such. To further understand this assertion, it is important to attend to how the infrequent and strategic references to the President, as a husband and as the head of the executive branch of government, work to undermine Michelle and Barack Obama's iconicity as the first Black First Family. Icons are immortal and fixed in time. Yet, as the First Lady shifts away from campaign specifics to

a more meta-examination of the initiative's goals, she discloses, "We know it won't be easy. We won't get there this year. And we probably won't get there this administration. We know it will take a nationwide movement that continues long after we're gone." I offer this focus on temporality within autonomous partnering and the performance of archetypal black female citizenship to address and interrogate the visible invisibility of black bodies in mainstream public spaces as explored in the introduction. Returning back to the original argument over the utility of the black leading lady, and given the anxiety toward the crisis of childhood obesity, merely acknowledging the limits of time (i.e., "we probably won't get there this administration") reflects a knowing sense of the ephemerality of their iconicity and its effects on their work. For all of the firsts the Obamas represent (and what they will be remembered for), there is a haunting affect to Michelle Obama's admission that reads as a purposeful challenge to those who would seek to assert their own archetypal performance of black women's citizenship. In this vein, I suggest archetypal black female citizenship is an appeal to community through an intentional awareness toward public service.

Autonomous partnering also makes space for the performance of archetypal black female citizenship to restructure conceptions of black femininity within heterosexual relationships without succumbing to the myth of the "strong black woman." Attending to the strong black woman myth is warranted here given the misperception of this image as a positive intervention with traditional stereotypes, (i.e., the mammy, jezebel, sapphire,

and matriarch).<sup>41</sup> Public intellectual and political science scholar Melissa Harris-Perry contends the strong black woman persona operates as a “racial and citizenship imperative” (21) for black womanhood. She goes on to argue that the strong black woman is, in actuality, a “misrecognition” of the ways in which this imagery battles historically sexist and racist tropes of black women. Embodying the ideals of strength, independence and what Harris-Perry refers to as “self-denying” caregiving, the strong black woman is bound to upholding unrealistic expectations (185). Moreover, maintaining the perception of strong black womanhood leaves little room for vulnerability, leading many black women to feel deep humiliation when the foundation of this identity crumbles and they cannot perform to these expectations (186). The performance of archetypal black female citizenship draws on autonomous partnering to enable individuality without the requirement of exclusive self-reliance. From this vantage, strength is not mutually exclusive of vulnerability. Nor do the positive attributes of the strong black woman myth negate the more traditional conceptions of femininity proffered through gendered expectations.

In fact, the performance of femininity witnessed through archetypal black female citizenship actually makes space for imperfection and weakness as integral to humanity. Turning back to the moment when Michelle Obama depoliticizes the structure of the

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<sup>41</sup> As a point of clarity, I would like to offer some thoughts on why the strong black woman trope is not subsumed by the image of the sapphire or the matriarch. The strong black woman can be considered a pre-Obama era identification of black womanhood that counters television personality Omarosa’s activation of Sapphire on Donald Trump’s television show, *The Apprentice*, in 2004. In this vein, the strong black woman attempts to recover the rhetoric of strength informed by the radical presence of black women. The strong black woman dispels associations with the matriarch image as the latter is a figure of the family; the strong black woman does not necessarily require familial ties.

*Let's Move!* initiative as a community-based national call to action helps to illuminate this point. At the moment she interrupts the performance of nostalgia, she also criticizes mythically constructed narratives of the past. Her initiative is a call grounded in common sense. As she proclaims, "This isn't about turning the clock back to when we were kids, preparing five course meals from scratch every night. No one has time for that. And it's not about being 100% perfect, 100% of the time because Lord knows I'm not." The First Lady dispels any notion of a mythic personhood. Her resistance to perfection and acknowledgment of her own failures is a way in which the performance of archetypal black female citizenship recognizes the multiplicity of U.S. American life. She goes on to offer, "And there's no, 'one size fits all' solution here. Instead, it's about families making manageable changes that fit with their schedules and their budgets and their needs, and tastes, and their realities." This last line suggests that there is no comparable or ideal model for families and communities to uphold, thereby reducing the need for black womanhood to uphold these standards either. By employing archetypal black female citizenship, Michelle Obama offers a critical intervention with standards of perfection in being and existing in the world.

#### **MOBILIZING DIVA CITIZENSHIP**

"[A] diva makes herself a force to be reckoned with."  
– Alexander Doty<sup>42</sup>

In early 2013, Michelle Obama made five television appearances over the span of two weeks to coincide directly with the third anniversary of the *Let's Move!* campaign

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<sup>42</sup> Alexander Doty, "Introduction: There's Something About Mary," (3).

launch.<sup>43</sup> In what was dubbed “the charm offensive,” this carefully executed media blitz included a sit-down interview with Robin Roberts on *Good Morning America*, announcing the Academy Award for Best Picture via satellite, and “mom-dancing” with Jimmy Fallon on *Late Night*.<sup>44</sup> Following Michelle Obama’s initiative-related cameos throughout the spring of 2014, an article published by the *Guardian* applauded the First Lady for her strategic use of popular culture mediums to promote her causes, particularly that of *Let’s Move!*. Arguing that Michelle Obama’s guest appearances exhibited a type of unprecedented political “savvy” compared to her First Lady contemporaries and other media-inclined elected politicians, the publication took special favor with Michelle Obama’s seemingly joyous and “self-deprecating” personality.<sup>45</sup> It should be noted, however, that – political savvy aside – first ladies have always assumed a type of celebrity status. As Robert Watson reveals, first ladies “[are] considered [some] of the most powerful people in Washington,” and are regularly listed in the Gallup Poll’s, “Most Admired Women” (19). What the aforementioned commentary seems to suggest, therefore, is there is something particular to how Michelle Obama appears to embody this essence of celebrity. Perhaps, in one way, what we witness in the First Lady’s public appearances is a demonstration of heightened political savvy. On the other hand, and where the concluding section of this chapter turns attention toward, perhaps what we witness is merely evidence of diva mobilization in the performance of archetypal black female citizenship.

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<sup>43</sup> Beth Stebner, “First Lady of Publicity?”

<sup>44</sup> Eun Kyung Kim, “Michelle Obama’s ‘Charm Offensive’ Draws Criticism.”

<sup>45</sup> Danielle Henderson, “Michelle Obama’s Many Cameos...”

My decision to introduce the concept of the diva arises, in part, from a need to find language for an aspect of Michelle Obama's public persona that I feel is wholly inarticulable. Without veering too far beyond the scope of my concern, I would like to turn – briefly – to Fred Moten's work in "The Case of Blackness." In his article, Moten adopts an Afro-optimistic approach to counter Frantz Fanon's authoritative Afro-pessimist supposition in *Black Skins, White Masks* that claims black ontology is subsumed by abjection and negation. Resisting the totality of black subjugation offered by Fanon, Moten argues there is conceptual space between thinking of blackness as a thing or object (i.e., property) and blackness as merely debased subjectivity. Finding a way to work productively within this void, Moten turns to a translation of Martin Heidegger's "Das Ding" ("The Thing"). Moten draws on Heidegger's discussion of a jug as "an exemplary thing" and reveals that the jug, as a vessel, remains a vessel whether or not it is represented as such in our minds ("The Case" 183). As Moten explains, "the jug's being, as a vessel, is momentarily understood as being-in-its emptiness, the empty space that holds, the impalpable void brought forth by the potter as container" (184). Building on this, Moten goes on to suggest, "Perhaps the jug, as thing, is better understood as filled with an always already mixed capacity for content that is not made." I offer Moten's challenging work to illustrate the difficulty of identifying the nuance of Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal black female citizenship that routinely manifests in her public appearances. The *Guardian* refers to this "thingness" as political savvy. A historical genealogy of first ladies will address this through the concept of celebrity. I, however, believe the language we have used is insufficient in addressing the

totality of Michelle Obama's social, political, and cultural significance as a black First Lady and as a black leading lady. Drawing on the diva is my attempt at giving fuller rhetorical shape to this complexity.

Attending to the diva, therefore, accounts for the particularity of Michelle Obama's personality within her performance of archetypal black female citizenship that cannot be contained nor adequately characterized in language. This is, perhaps, because Michelle Obama – as a black leading lady – presents herself as a “troubling” figure (Doty, “Introduction” 4). As I contend, the emergence of the black leading lady is derived, in part, from the way her imaging of black womanhood represents “a [break] out of [her] ‘proper’ culturally assigned sex, gender, sexuality, class, national, ethnic, and racial spaces” (4). Even as Michelle Obama remains properly contained and reflective of normative (white) womanhood required of a First Lady, she exists as a black leading lady. In this way, I understand the black leading lady – rather than the role of First Lady – to subscribe to a position that forces “tradition and convention [to] yield (or at least bend) to her” (2). Throughout this chapter, I have offered archetypal black female citizenship as a way to demonstrate how Michelle Obama, as a black leading lady, navigates the intricacy of her symbolic role within a particularly race, classed, and gendered frame. I have argued that archetypal black female citizenship gives the appearance of adhering to historical and cultural precedence while simultaneously carving spaces of resistance. In this way, I reveal how the performance of archetypal black female citizenship makes space for the black leading lady to challenge and shift what it means to embody nationally representative femininity. As the first black First Lady, Michelle Obama

mimics normative behaviors of mainstream (i.e., white) womanhood exemplified in the office of the First Lady. At the same time, however, Michelle Obama is continually refashioning precedence and breaking with the established norm, thereby making her performance of archetypal black female citizenship primed for diva associations.

Situating divaness as a component of archetypal black female citizenship illuminates, in part, the meaning of Michelle Obama's representational fortitude beyond what can be hailed in her public imaging. Interrogating the relationship between imaging (as representation) and performance, Peggy Phelan reminds us that "representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing" (2). As Phelan goes on to explain, the relationship between the real and the representation (in this case, between Michelle Obama and her persona as a black leading lady) is inherently dialogical. The one is always understood in direct correlation to the other. What is useful in Phelan's excavation is the way in which the inherent failure of representational totality makes space for exploring Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal black female citizenship vis-à-vis a diva sensibility. Alexander Doty describes the diva – both fictional and "real-life" divas – as a figure who "offer[s] the world a compelling brass standard that has plenty to say...[to] marginalized groups about the costs and the rewards that can come when you decide both to live a conspicuous public life within white patriarchy and to try and live that life on your own terms" ("Introduction" 2). As illustrated by the aforementioned commentary in the *Guardian*, the First Lady's personality is an integral component to her public performance. Where that commentary fails, however, is precisely where I would like to situate theoretical suppositions of the diva. In doing so, I



seek to offer a more exacting articulation of what is often considered an ineffable affect to Michelle Obama's personality. I also want to make space for Michelle Obama to exist beyond what can be explored or contained in her public imaging as a black leading lady. In doing so, I seek to honor Michelle Obama's enactment of archetypal black female citizenship in a way that recognizes how aspects of this stylized performance are decidedly hers and extend beyond what her audiences and critics can name.

The diva assumes a host of cultural connotations, many of which – in recent years – have slanted toward the negative. In addition to the reckoning incited by Alexander Doty's rendering of the diva at the opening of this section, I also present the diva in the most affirming sense of the word. To echo Mia Mask, my understanding of the diva is “not negative or laden with notions of class privilege” (*Divas* 9). Rather, my engagement with the diva emerges from a knowing sense of her (or his) compelling self-possession. I am also invested in the way the diva is situated within a genealogy of citizenship as explored by cultural studies scholar, Lauren Berlant. Berlant writes of Diva Citizenship as “a moment of emergence that marks unrealized potentials for subaltern political activity... a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege” (*Queen of America* 223). My acknowledgment of the diva within archetypal black female citizenship demonstrates how Michelle Obama, as a black leading lady, enacts what Berlant identifies as “subaltern survival”(221). In this vein, the divaness of archetypal black female citizenship reveals how Michelle Obama maintains a sense of herself and thrives in an environment that is intent on her destruction. The diva extraordinarily and unapologetically occupies space that – to her – would otherwise be denied.

Regardless of any necessary or perceived handling of the First Lady's public persona, Michelle Obama's performance archetypal black female citizenship exhibits diva qualities in her unique ability to appear uninhibited and self-reflexive while laughing at herself and with others. Shortly after taking the podium at the initiative's launch and thanking the constituencies in attendance for offering their show of support, the First Lady shifts her attention to former NFL player, Tiki Barber, who is seated to her left facing the crowd. Michelle Obama turns her head and says, "I want to thank Tiki [Barber], good emcee. Pretty sharp. Good on your feet." The crowd joins in a hearty chuckle at her joke.<sup>46</sup> In a brief exchange, barely audible over the noise of the crowd, Barber responds to her quip as the First Lady turns back to the audience. Over the microphone, Michelle Obama affirms Barber's interjection with a quick, "Yeah, yeah" before continuing to share with the audience, "He's still upset [because] he's shorter than me. It's okay, Tiki." The audience erupts into laughter with Michelle Obama joining them. She glances down at Barber, still laughing, and quickly adjusts her dress before returning the audience. "That was the first thing he said, he was visibly – 'I didn't know you were so tall!' And I was like, yeah, I know, I know. It's okay. It's okay."

This particular moment speaks volumes to the way in which Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal black female citizenship asserts divaness to talk back to public critiques of her body. It is a resistive strategy, one that subverts the violence of the gaze incited by the presence of her black womanness. Since entering the White House, the

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<sup>46</sup> As running back for the New York Giants, Tiki Barber (now retired) held – and continues to hold at the writing of this dissertation – the team record for rushing yards.

First Lady has succumbed to heavy scrutiny over the presentation of her body, and particularly the exposure of her arms. Many responded to her 2009 official White House portrait negatively, calling her choice to dress in a black, sleeveless Michael Kohrs dress, inappropriate.<sup>47</sup> Descriptions of the First Lady's arms as "athletic" are, in actuality, apt reflections of the processes of racialization on black womanhood.<sup>48</sup> Given the imaginative and historical construction of black women as "mules of the world," Michelle Obama is necessarily attributed with what would be described as "non-feminine" descriptors. The public understands black women's bodies as uniquely suited for labor and strength. The fact that morning talk shows and women's magazines discuss the First Lady's arms as a desirable physicality does little to mitigate the racist underpinning of these comments.

By purposefully directing attention to her body in comparison to a renowned and respected male football player, Michelle Obama's divaness demonstrates how the performance of archetypal black female citizenship uses Barber as the foil to be boldly present. Rather than submit to the expectations of demure femininity, Michelle Obama activates what Melissa Harris-Perry calls a "self-conscious taunting" (280). Her taunt resists crafting an aura of dissemblance (Hine) to walk directly into the vulnerable and resistant space of self-reclamation. To understand this approach requires a deeper reflection on the myriad ways the diva is mobilized for public consumption. The diva

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<sup>47</sup> Though commentary to this effect ran rampant in 2009, my comment is made in response to those who felt more comfortable with the First Lady's second term portrait. See Jackie Calmes, "New Chatter Around First Lady's Portrait."

<sup>48</sup> Maureen Dowd mentions David Brooks who referred to Michelle Obama's arms as "thunder and lightning" in the March 7, 2009 *New York Times* op-ed, "Should Michelle Cover Up?"

functions on stage as a persona; there is a knowing sense to how the diva mask is stylized and embodied for public presentation. In fact, Shane Vogel writes of Lena Horne as a political diva who performed an “impersona” as a way of not stepping into the audience’s desired mask for her racial and gendered comportment, remaining a performer that was always just “out of reach” (“Lena Horne’s Impersona” 33). Though the black leading lady manifests as a type of persona, I contend she fluctuates between being a mobilization for the benefit of others and one strictly for her own accord. For instance, the joke, “He’s still upset [because] he’s shorter than me,” emphasizes the way Michelle Obama understands her body is perceived as a physical threat or anomaly for her historical role as well as for gendered norms of womanhood. This effect is heightened by the fact that the First Lady stands while Barber remains seated. As Harris-Perry asserts, “Michelle refuses to be ashamed of her distinctive black woman’s body and all the attributes and anxieties it evokes” (280). Moreover, the First Lady’s gentle, “It’s okay, Tiki,” allows the taunt to serve as diva-mollification, a reminder to herself – even if others remain unhinged – that her presence, as a black woman, as a black first lady, is perfect in its diva defiance.

It is this same element of respect and love for her black femininity in its diva fullness that is carried throughout her public appearances with the *Let’s Move!* initiative and activated through the performance of archetypal black female citizenship. In fact, Michelle Obama’s unique style is her ease in the public, her comfort with the popular and, most importantly, her ability to laugh *with* the audience. Her appearance on *Late Night* with Jimmy Fallon is a clear example of this. In the segment called, “The Evolution

of Mom-Dancing” Fallon appears onstage wearing an auburn wig that falls just past his shoulder, and dressed in a pink cardigan over a white shell, with khaki pants and white sneakers. Both the segment title and Fallon’s costume gesture toward stereotypical conceptions of suburban mothering. The First Lady joins him, dressed in similarly casual attire, though bolder in its pattern and bright green color. They begin dancing together with a simple and easy step-touch routine to a synthesized music track. Their dance moves shift between the “Go Shopping, Get Groceries,” the “Raise the Roof,” the “Hip Bump,” the “Just the Hands Part of Single Ladies,” along with several other dance styles. The key moment in the segment occurs at the end when they both attempt the dance routine, “The Dougie,” a hip-hop style movement based on the song “Teach Me How to Dougie” by Cali Swag District. Interestingly enough, it is the last move, “The Dougie,” that Fallon cannot complete. Michelle Obama eases into the movement bringing her hands to pass coolly near her head as she “shimmies” her feet. She has an air of delight in her face as the audience cheers and Fallon leaves her alone on stage.

The diva mobilization in archetypal black female citizenship reveals how performance literally and metaphorically moves the black leading lady on the national stage. To echo Stacy Wolf, “it is the practice of performance that truly confers divadom” (“*Wicked*” 47). From dancing to hula hooping, from jumping rope double-dutch to dunking a basketball over NBA star, LeBron James, Michelle Obama unabashedly propels her body into the spotlight. She is playful in the way she embraces body vulnerability. She enters bravely into her movement, even if she is less than virtuosic in her execution. In fact, any perceived awkwardness or motion mishaps are played to the

First Lady's advantage as they demonstrate the diva's "careful negotiation between exquisitely crafted self-image and an embodiment of authenticity" (Paredes, *Selenidad* 160). Everything that Michelle Obama enacts in the performance of archetypal black female citizenship is partly because it is expected and curated, and partly because it is simply who she is – as Michelle Obama and as a black leading lady.

### **“WE HAVE TO DO IT ALL”**

The whole of this dissertation project is invested in uncovering the myriad ways in which visible and popular black womanhood vis-à-vis the black leading lady reinscribes, resists, or restructures prevailing conceptions of black women's subjectivity in the United States. Throughout this chapter, in particular, I engaged questions surrounding the black leading lady and citizenship. More pointedly, I sought to uncover how black womanhood is inserted into ideological conceptualizations of the U.S. body politic and becomes an embodied representative of U.S. nationality. Arguing for the performance of archetypal black female citizenship, I offered a frame and language for examining Michelle Obama's exemplar positionality as the first black First Lady. By nature of circumstance Michelle Obama is a physical site of convergence for dissenting if not wholly disparate histories, epistemologies, and subjectivities. As I have argued, Michelle Obama's visibility as a black First Lady necessitates that the public grapple with blackness in ways many would rather not confront. Reflecting what Lauren Berlant observes in the privileging of heterosexuality within the dominant narrative of national identity, Michelle Obama has required normative citizenship "to become newly explicit

[where] people have had to become aware of the institutions, narratives, pedagogies, and social practices that support it” (17). My work has suggested a way to read the appearance of perceived conformity as an opportunity to stage resistance.

Michelle Obama’s performance of archetypal black female citizenship indicates that, regardless of any conclusive evidence toward shifting discourse on black womanhood since her tenure in the White House began in 2009, the need for making such changes is clearly warranted. Much of the resistance that Michelle Obama encounters in her historic role is derived from the fact that we have not found a productive way to confront or deconstruct the “norm.” As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, archetypal black female citizenship is a way to address and expose the fissures of citizenship’s normativity. Michelle Obama, as a black leading lady, offers us a productive site to engage the complexities of race, gender, and class as they are subsumed under the umbrella of citizenship. The conversations that are most needed as they affect the subaltern and marginalized involve issues that are always intersecting and multiply informed. While this claim is decidedly driven by black feminist ideology, it is also inherent to the activation of archetypal black female citizenship.

In the closing moments of the *Let’s Move!* initiative launch, the First Lady responds to those who might challenge the relevancy and necessity of her proposed call:

There are going to be those who ask, “How on earth can we spend money on fruits and vegetables in the cafeterias when many schools don’t even have books and teachers? Or, how can we afford to build parks and sidewalks when we can’t even afford our health care costs? But when you step back and think about it, you realize these are false choices. Because if kids aren’t getting adequate nutrition, even the best books and teachers in the world won’t help them get where they

want to be. And if they don't have safe places to run and play, and they wind up with obesity related conditions, then those healthcare costs will just keep rising.

So yes, we have to do it all.

Michelle Obama's refusal to engage specialized prioritization (i.e., focusing on nutrition over general rising healthcare costs, or classroom support for teachers and students) reveals how archetypal black female citizenship is invested in addressing simultaneously energized systems of oppression. Recognizing how economics, education and health are intimately interrelated demonstrates how there can be no separation of one from the other if the concern of childhood obesity is to be addressed and eradicated in its entirety. According to the First Lady, the problem is one that is "imminently solvable." Even if the end results fall short of expectation, I would like to think archetypal black female citizenship demonstrates how the black leading lady continually places herself at the foreground of multiply signified and compounded experiences of humanity and survival.



### Chapter Three: Scripting Sexuality: The Erotic Subjectivity of Olivia Pope in ABC's *Scandal*

"I don't think we have to have a discussion about race when you're watching a black woman who is having an affair with the white president of the United States. The discussion is right in front of your face."

– Shonda Rhimes<sup>49</sup>

During the 2013 Oscar telecast, ABC aired a mid-season promotional trailer for its Thursday-night ratings phenomenon, *Scandal*. The James Bond-inspired spot<sup>50</sup> featured actress Kerry Washington, who plays the show's lead character Olivia Pope, a D.C. "fixer" of public relations crises for the political, social, and corporate elite. In the 30-second trailer, Washington appears on screen partially dressed in a shimmery, flesh-toned, two-piece ensemble. A seductive piano track plays while the camera zooms in on different parts of Washington's exposed flesh: her profiled face, back, arched neck, her hand as it sweeps her hair across the shoulder, and grazes up her arm, across her stomach, and over the curve of her hip. Scenes of stolen glances and passionate kisses between Olivia Pope and her lover, President Fitzgerald "Fitz" Grant (Tony Goldwyn), are projected onto Washington's skin, interrupted by quick flashes of fire bursts and symbols of Americana. A soft breeze blows through Washington's hair. Punctuated by a bursting flame at the height of the music, a projection of President Grant during his inauguration appears in brief instances on Washington's stomach and back shoulder, before the camera pans up her extended leg revealing a United States flag. An unidentifiable deep male

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<sup>49</sup> See Willa Paskin, "Network TV is Broken..." from the *New York Times* on May 9, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> TVline.com from Feb. 24, 2013 explained the promo was part of an Oscar tribute to the 50th anniversary of the James Bond franchise. See Matt Mitovich, "Once Upon a Time...."

voice comes in over the music: “When your lover is the president...” The camera continues to pan up toward Washington’s bare stomach before stopping on her face as SCANDAL appears in bold red letters just under her closed eyes. As the voiceover concludes, Washington looks slowly into the camera: “...every inch of you is a scandal.”

When *Scandal* premiered on April 5, 2012, the visual landscape of broadcast television transformed. For the first time in nearly forty years, a black actress occupied the lead role of a primetime network drama. The premise of the show is based loosely on the career of real-life Washington crisis manager and former White House aide, Judy Smith, also a black woman.<sup>51</sup> The character of Olivia Pope embodies many of Smith’s well-known characteristics as she adheres to a strict code of honesty and heightened morality, and is driven by an unfaltering work ethic. Olivia Pope is the fearless leader to her team of associates – self-named “gladiators” – all of whom wear their loyalty to her as a badge of honor. They follow her directives without question, frequently diving “over a cliff” to enact Olivia’s plan and higher purpose, even if their actions are in direct conflict with the law. Like Smith, Olivia fashions her career by remaining behind the scenes, known only by name and reputation.<sup>52</sup> Olivia Pope also adopts her counterpart’s signature look by wearing meticulously tailored white coats over power suits.<sup>53</sup> In both appearance and profession, Olivia Pope reflects a less visible characterization of real-life

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<sup>51</sup> Judy Smith is also credited as one of the show’s executive producers.

<sup>52</sup> According to the *Washington Post* from March 30, 2012, Smith’s crisis management and communications firm is not listed nor does she own business cards. See Neely Tucker, “D.C. Insider...”

<sup>53</sup> See The Reliable Source, “Judy Smith...”

professional black womanhood as she ushers the black leading lady onto the television screen.

Despite the ostensibly radical intervention Olivia Pope's character makes with televisual culture, the 2013 Oscar telecast promotional trailer reinforces much of the hypersexualized imagery anticipated from representations of black women in mass mediated forms of entertainment and culture. Erased from the promotional spot is any acknowledgment of Olivia Pope as a self-employed entrepreneur whose clients depend on her fastidiousness, calculation, and impenetrable gut instincts. Even her impeccable sense of style, which is often a highlight of discussion for many of the show's fans, is nonexistent.<sup>54</sup> In its place is a gratuitous display of sexuality that not only negates Olivia Pope's professional success but is also a gross exaggeration of Smith's firmly established boundaries of professionalism. While producers have been clear to acknowledge that Olivia Pope is merely a shadow of Smith's real-life persona,<sup>55</sup> this separation between fact and fiction along the lines of sexuality raises significant implications for Washington/Pope as a televisual representative of the black leading lady.<sup>56</sup>

Throughout this chapter I argue that *Scandal* provides an opportunity to wrestle with the way sexuality informs contemporary representations of black womanhood via the black leading lady. In ways similar to Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal

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<sup>54</sup> In early 2015, Kerry Washington, and *Scandal* costume designer, Lyn Paolo, teamed up with The Limited to develop a clothing line inspired by Olivia Pope.

<sup>55</sup> Judy Smith, has been adamant in denying all sexual encounters with any U.S. president. She is quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying, "No. Across the board, no." See The Reliable Source, "Judy Smith...."

<sup>56</sup> Kerry Washington has maintained she would not have accepted the role of Olivia Pope if a black actor had been cast as President Grant. She was afraid the audience would make false associations between President Grant and President Barack Obama. See Brande Victorian, "Hmmm...."

black female citizenship, Olivia Pope's sexual expressivity is crafted to navigate a history of black women's sexual degradation in ways that both affirms what audiences anticipate from sexual imagery in mainstream mediums and pushes the conceptual boundaries of these characterizations. In this chapter, I engage the concept of the *sexual script* to explore, expand, and challenge how sexuality and sexual expression inform perceptions of the black leading lady. I argue there is a strategically employed *sexual script* operating within *Scandal* that revises how audiences have come to encounter representations of black womanhood in a televisual format. I contend the *sexual script* prompts audiences to read and unread race on Olivia Pope's body. In doing so, the sexual script interrupts the easily recognizable and readily understood conceptions of black women's sexual expression informed by what I identify as the *sexual scenario*. As I go on to demonstrate, the *sexual scenario* frames Olivia Pope in ways that make her sexuality legible to viewers primarily through the lens of miscegenation and sexual exploitation. I believe the *sexual script*, however, performs the labor of punctuating racial significations thereby allowing Olivia Pope's erotic subjectivity to be expressed in a way that, in one respect, reinscribes racial nostalgia and, alternately, disrupts racialized stereotypes.

Ultimately, I contend the *sexual script* offers an approach to address and maybe even broaden our collective and contemporary understanding of black women's sexuality through the black leading lady. As noted in the introduction, stereotypical renderings of black womanhood via controlling images are intimately tethered to discourse on sexuality. Because I place the black leading lady in conversation with these representative tropes, sex is the dominant frame for my analysis. As such, I am interested

in the way the sexual script complicates our understanding of black womanhood, black female success, sexual desire, sexual expression and sexual autonomy, particularly in mainstream imaging. In doing so, it is my hope that we can begin to move away from emphasizing the relationship between black women and sex in order to give greater consideration for black women, intimacy, and love. With this in mind I ask: What are the implications of failing to view the relationship between Olivia Pope and the President outside coercion and sexual exploitation? What tools are required for women like Shonda Rhimes and producers of black representation to create a product that is commercially successful but pushes the boundaries of racial and gendered essentialism? Why is black women's erotic subjectivity the ideal mechanism through which this intervention is employed? What follows offers an extensive excavation of the *sexual script* through a close textual analysis of two selected episodes of *Scandal*: Season 1, Episode 6, "The Trail," and Season 2, Episode 8, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President." These episodes are offered as illustrative examples for exploring the utility of my proposed concepts. This chapter, first, provides a brief contextual background before offering working definitions of the sexual script and the sexual scenario. These terms are then further explored by analyzing two thematic frames: scripting sexuality and scripting desirability, before concluding with thoughts on black womanhood and love.

## **BLACK LEADING LADIES IN TELEVISION**

*Scandal's* creator and executive producer, Shonda Rhimes, made a conscious and critical decision to not only base the series off of Judy Smith but to maintain racial

congruity when casting Kerry Washington as the lead. Presently, Rhimes is considered one of the most prolific women in entertainment, and holds the title as the most successful black female show runner in primetime television.<sup>57</sup> Despite being known for building multiracial ensembles through a colorblind approach to writing and casting, *Scandal* is a deviation from Rhimes's previous ABC successes, the medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* and its spin-off *Private Practice*, both of which feature a white female protagonist. In many ways, Olivia Pope is not only a phenotypic departure from the dominant representations of women in national broadcast television. By not adhering to the emasculating, mammy-esque, "bad bitch" tropes of black femininity, Olivia Pope is also a depiction of black womanhood rarely afforded attention in either television or film. It would seem that with *Scandal*, Rhimes wisely spent her production capital on a subversive yet highly marketable aim.<sup>58</sup>

The emphasis on sexuality within the *Scandal* promotional trailer, therefore, can be viewed as indicative of the larger ways in which black leading ladies are made viable in a dramatic televisual format. Prior to *Scandal*, black women in television had been featured predominantly in situation comedies. In the 1990s and early 2000s, particularly, situation comedies such as *Living Single* and *Girlfriends* offered the most diverse representation of black women in television as subjects independent of male protagonists

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<sup>57</sup> At the time of this dissertation's completion, Rhimes is listed as creator for *Grey's Anatomy*, going into its eleventh season, and *Scandal* going into its fifth season. In the fall of 2014, Rhimes' production company, Shondaland, added a third series to ABC's Thursday night lineup with the premiere of *How to Get Away With Murder*, starring Viola Davis; the show is presently going into its second season.

<sup>58</sup> In an interview printed in *Essence* magazine from March 2012, Rhimes is quoted saying she knew she would not receive any push back from network executives for her decision to cast an African American woman. As she said, "Nobody was going to tell me I can't do that." See Lola Ogunnaike, "Shonda Rhimes."

(Smith-Shomade). Outside of situation comedies, however, televisual portrayals of black women have been limited at best. Prior to *Scandal*, the last black female lead of a primetime television drama, Teresa Graves, appeared in the series *Get Christie Love!* (1974-1975).<sup>59</sup> The television show was based on the made-for-TV Blaxploitation film by the same name. According to Yvonne Sims, throughout the short-lived series, Graves had significant input over her character, Christie Love, and eventually refused to act in violent scenes, speak profanities or appear in a sexually suggestive manner (114). While Sims attributes limited enthusiasm for the show to a general decline in interest for the Blaxploitation genre, it would not be a stretch to assume that Graves's reluctance to have her character appear overtly sexual interfered with public reception of the series.<sup>60</sup>

As a black leading lady, Olivia Pope traverses terrain typically understood as inaccessible to and wholly underrepresented by black women in television. Not only did she emerge in a landscape mostly devoid of a significant presence from black women, Olivia has unprecedented access to political, social, and economic capital. Unlike *Get Christie Love!*, however, *Scandal's* narrative is anchored in an illicit affair making sex and sexuality the driving force of the show. Add to this the interracial aspect of Olivia Pope's sexual transgression, combined with the show's widespread popularity, and her particular instantiation as a black leading lady becomes much more compelling. By most accounts, interracial relationships assume a form of taboo affect in both fictional

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<sup>59</sup> According to Yvonne D. Sims, Teresa Graves ushered in the era of featuring women as police detectives in crime dramas, though she was not the first African American woman to be lead of a television series (79). That title belongs to Diahann Carroll, who appeared in *Julia* in 1968; the series lasted for three seasons.

<sup>60</sup> Sims included Teresa Graves and *Get Christie Love!* in her study because Graves's role acted as an exemplar for subsequent female-oriented action heroines in television beginning in 1975 (20).

depictions and in real life. Despite the current appearance of progressive racial politics in the United States, miscegenation – particularly between black and white individuals – remains a delicate topic of discussion. *Scandal*, however, is one of the highest rated series in primetime television. The show’s overall viewership trends toward nearly 9 million per week placing it consistently at the top of the Nielsen charts.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly enough, African-Americans make up nearly 40% of its weekly audience.<sup>62</sup> Given *Scandal*’s majority non-black viewership coupled with its significant appeal among black television watchers, it appears the interracial sexual affair is not only socially acceptable but also narratively enticing.

In an interview with Shonda Rhimes in late 2013 on National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition*, Renee Montagne challenged Rhimes on her construction of what she perceived many would find to be an “unsympathetic” character. In her description of Olivia’s relationship with President Grant, Montagne describes the decision to ground the narrative arch in an affair as a risk “all by itself.”<sup>63</sup> Implicit in this statement is Montagne’s suggestion that Olivia Pope’s likeability and, thereby, the show’s popularity is more vulnerable because the affair is interracial. What is clear from Rhimes’s response to Montagne, however, is how little she is interested in crafting sympathy for Olivia Pope

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<sup>61</sup> These numbers were taken from an article posted on May 16, 2015 from TVSeriesFinale.com after *Scandal*’s Season 4 finale.

<sup>62</sup> CNN Money reported on January 28, 2015 that the 2014-2015 television season saw a significant increase in African American viewership across networks. *Scandal* was the second most popular show among black households behind Fox’s *Empire*, whose audience was 61% African American – a statistic unmatched in the history of television. See Frank Pallotta and Brian Stelter, “African-American Fuel Prime Time....”

<sup>63</sup> The segment, “Shonda Rhimes Knows Where This ‘Scandal’ Will End” appeared on NPR’s, *Morning Edition*.



or any of her characters. Moreover, the implications of race – as evidenced by the opening epigraph – appear incidental. As will be discussed later in the chapter, Rhimes created the first explicit reference to race and Olivia and Fitz’s relationship in the episode “Happy Birthday, Mr. President.” Rhimes did so as a flashback scene and only because she “knew that it would be on [Olivia’s] mind” (Paskin).<sup>64</sup> Moreover, as Rhimes reveals on NPR, Olivia Pope is a character that is supposed to “feel watchable.” She explains:

Now we’re in a world in which nobody is worried about whether or not the women [in television] are likable. If you have a show with a female lead, which was a fairly rare thing to do a little while ago, because it was so rare everybody wanted that person to be perfect because she had to represent everybody. Olivia Pope is very rare because she is an African American woman and everybody wants her to be perfect because she has to represent everybody. So there’s...a box you get placed in. My goal, really, is to blow that box wide open.

What I would like to suggest is that “blowing the box wide open” is precisely why race matters within the series and how it informs the way Olivia Pope’s sexuality is audienced.

Even if, as Rhimes implies, race is ancillary to the driving force of the narrative, it is still an integral factor to Olivia Pope’s construction as a black leading lady. In fact, significations of race, particularly blackness, are routinely veiled and unveiled throughout the series. Returning to the Oscar promotional trailer offers an astute depiction of this at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality: The spotlight on Washington/Pope’s body draws sensual attention toward her physical features. Her exposed flesh reveals the way Washington/Pope physically mimics standards of beauty and femininity most often

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<sup>64</sup> In general, Rhimes dissuades pervasive references to race – both in her shows and in her professional life. As she tells the *New York Times*, “That’s not how the world works. I’m a black woman every day, and I’m not confused about that. I’m not worried about that.” For more, see Paskin, “Network TV Is Broken.”

associated with desirable (white) women. The trailer accentuates Washington/Pope's bare, flat, lightly toned stomach and hair that moves at the tiniest hint of breeze. These moments are paired with projections of Pope involved in sexually charged moments with the President alongside symbols of U.S. nationality, and all of this is underscored by a male voice that names her body as a scandal. In many ways, the trailer positions Olivia Pope, a black leading lady and protagonist, as a troubling site of subversion *and* reinforcement of stereotypical black female representation. She is at once a rarely portrayed object of desire while also acting as a figure of disgrace. Through this juxtaposition, Washington/Pope embodies a continuous break with and (re)inscription of black women's affectively and physically taut relationship with U.S. history.

Ultimately, I believe if Olivia Pope's sexual relationship with the president was solely framed by and read through the lens of sexual coercion, *Scandal* would not elicit such a loyal fan base of African Americans. Alternately, the show would not garner such attention from non-black audiences if there were not something provocative about the way Olivia Pope reflects and deflects racialized and gendered codes of normativity through her sexuality and, particularly, through her illicit affair. This is the heart of my concern with the representative effects of Olivia Pope as a black leading lady: why does sexuality prime the black leading lady for mainstream television? Moreover, how does this imaging resist being consumed by dominant tropes? With these questions in mind, I will now turn to detailing the parameters of the sexual script and the sexual scenario.

## BETWEEN THE SEXUAL SCRIPT AND THE SEXUAL SCENARIO

Attending to the sexual script offers a way to address the properties of *Scandal's* narrative that craft consideration for the marketability and utility of a complicated, charged, and ideologically irresolvable construction of sexuality vis-à-vis the black leading lady. I broadly conceptualize the term script as the narrative cues that guide the viewer's interpretation of the screen action. The script includes, but is not limited to, elements of costuming, character interaction, music, and the setting. I also consider the narrative space and narrative agency of the characters as a critical component to the production of the script.<sup>65</sup> The sexual script is offered within the same vein as Richard Schechner's taxonomical articulation of script as a "blueprint for the [embodied] enactment" ("Drama" 6). In his careful and purposeful delineation of the boundaries between performance, theatre, script, and drama, Schechner's employment of script acts as the "basic code" for the performance event (8). The sexual script explored here, though primarily managed by Shonda Rhimes, reflects an industry that instructs the visual production of sexuality in mainstream public mediums. The code illuminated via the sexual script, therefore, is one that anticipates and regulates viewership based on televisual scopic desire. The analysis that follows does not attempt to address all aspects of the script simultaneously. Rather, my approach highlights how focusing on particular

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<sup>65</sup> Shonda Rhimes's writing style is often likened to Aaron Sorkin in the pacing of the dialogue. (Sorkin created the Emmy-award winning political drama, *The West Wing*, and was a writer on the series for four seasons.) Yet, there is something unique about the long, calculated monologues that many of Rhimes's characters are often able to participate in.

elements of the sexual script interrupts, suspends, or exploits essentialist and reductive forms of racial interpellation within the show.

The concept of the *sexual script* is proposed as a means of attending to what I identify as the *sexual scenario* underscoring the television series. Returning back to the opening epigraph of this chapter helps to illustrate this point. Shonda Rhimes's reference to the "discussion about race" assumes the racially marked/unmarked bodies of Olivia Pope and President Grant act as the primary vehicle of racial discourse. In other words, their bodies tell the story of race in the United States without any explicit narrative disclosure. Borrowing from Diana Taylor, I employ scenario as a "meaning-making paradigm...that make[s] visible, yet again, what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes" (28). What Rhimes implies, and what the scenario frames, is how the emotionally charged and historically violent history of race in the United States is triggered through the bodies of black women in sexual relationships with white men. What Rhimes craftily exposes is what has "always been in the closet of American history."<sup>66</sup> The implied discourse of miscegenation, racial terror and the denigration of black women in the United States are activated through the sheer visibility of black and white bodies interacting or making contact through sex.

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<sup>66</sup> Barbara Omolade writes in her essay, "Hearts of Darkness," "sex...has always been hidden away from and kept outside the public realm of political and economic events. White men used their power in the public sphere to construct a private sphere that would meet their needs and their desire for black women, which if publically admitted would have undermined the false construct of race they needed to maintain public power" (363-364).

I contend, however, the process of identifying the *sexual script* interrupts the easily framed “stock elements” produced through the *sexual scenario*.<sup>67</sup> In this way, the *sexual script* illuminates the show’s strategic and purposeful navigation of race, gender and sexuality. Evidence of this can be gleaned from “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” (Season 2, Episode 8). As previously mentioned, this episode provides one of the first explicit articulations of race in the television series. It also informs how Olivia Pope takes possession of her erotic subjectivity and, subsequently, exposes how the sexual script and the sexual scenario inform this process. The episode is divided into six acts, and unfolds as a series of time jumps between present-day reactions to the assassination attempt on President Grant outside his birthday gala, and flashbacks to the early days of his new administration. In the third act of the episode, Olivia is seen in the corridors of the White House when she runs into the president. She pauses briefly when he calls out to her but quickly shakes off the address and continues walking. Earlier in the episode, the president and Olivia’s sexual tryst in the Oval Office is caught on tape by a Secret Service agent. After learning this, the lovers make use of their staff retreat at Camp David to write the State of the Union as a cover to continue their affair without watchful eyes; the only other place without cameras (and available for the president’s use) is the White House Residency. Their romantic sojourn is interrupted, however, when First Lady Mellie Grant (Bellamy Young) arrives unexpectedly. Olivia’s encounter with the President at the White House is the first time she has seen him since their return to Washington. In an

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<sup>67</sup> Taylor asserts, “the scenario is ‘formulaic, portable, repeatable, and often banal because it leave out complexity, [and] *reduces conflict to its stock elements*’ (54, my emphasis). ”

effort to contextualize her feelings and offer an excuse for her avoidance, Olivia admits to “feeling very Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson,” likening their relationship to that of former President Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress, Sally Hemings. A stunned President Grant stops and watches as Olivia continues her retreat down the hallway.

Activating the history of racial trauma through this very specific narrative of miscegenation performs several works in the way of calling attention to the sexual script’s operation. First, the call to Jefferson/Hemings underscores an inevitably rehearsed discussion surrounding interracial relationships between white men and black women as they are associated with antebellum politics and historically anti-black racisms. As Mia Mask explains, “interracial heterosexuality – with its link to reproduction – threatens the hegemony of whiteness because it breaks the biological assumptions implicit in definitions of race” (“Monster’s Ball” 45). This is why, as Mask goes on to reveal, anti-miscegenation sentiment across the United States denounces interracial sexual relationships, especially between black men and white women. White men, however, have not been held to the same social censuring. In fact, one of the most recognizable controlling images of black womanhood constructed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the figure of the hypersexed jezebel, employed to justify white men’s repeated rape and sexual exploitation of black women. The jezebel imagery imposes representations of black womanhood with an insatiable sexual appetite, thereby reducing white men’s complicity in their sexual indiscretions and erasing the “license to pursue coercive sexual liaisons” (45). While the sexual script blurs the line between choice and coercion for Olivia Pope (thereby making the association with Hemings less illustrative of the

aggressive and sexually voracious jezebel), it does expose the historically and structurally unequal power dynamics between white men and black women. From this vantage, Olivia's evocation of Sally Heming's relationship with Thomas Jefferson via the sexual script is an intentional call to the racial dynamics operating with the show.

By confronting the way race informs Olivia and Fitz's subjective positioning within their relationship, the reference to Hemings/Jefferson demonstrates how the sexual script interrupts the reductive reading of the active sexual scenario. As Diana Taylor explains, one of the key theoretical tenets of the scenario is that spectators are required to "pay attention to the milieu and corporeal behavior" of bodies in motion and in interaction with one another. Taylor goes on to assert:

Scenarios...grab the body and insert it into a frame. The body in the scenario, however, has space to maneuver because it is not scripted... Whether it's a question of mimetic representation...or of performativity...the scenario more fully allows us to keep both the social actor and the role in view simultaneously and thus recognize the uneasy fits and areas of tension (*Archive* 55).

In Taylor's explication, the social actor has the ability to undermine the strictures of the scenario because embodied action is not pre-determined (i.e., scripted). The frame, however, is still in place and requires audiences to wrestle with how particular bodies reflect what is already "known" or, in other words, identify the narratively and culturally informed mimetic representation.

The scenario also encourages audiences to reflect on where the body, or embodiment, dissents from the frame. Diana Taylor refers to this as the "uneasy fits and areas of tension" (55). I believe, however, that such an interpretation is difficult to achieve within a medium like television that is founded on its re-circulation of preferred

scenarios. This is especially true for the scenario of miscegenation, which becomes instantly activated when non-white bodies interact with white bodies – most notably when it is a black woman and a white man. As cultural critic bell hooks claims, audiences of mass media in the United States are conditioned to be perceptive of, yet uncritically consume, the images of television and film that reproduce and maintain white supremacy (*Black Looks*, 117). In *Scandal*, however, the moment Olivia activates the sexual script by citing a performative evocation of racial haunting (i.e., “I’m feeling very Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson about all of this,”) she exposes the mechanics of racial tension implicit in the sexual scenario – a tension that assumes, relies upon and, to an extent, anticipates Fitz’s authority and Olivia’s victimization. Through the sexual script and the act of naming a history many would prefer stay undisclosed, *Scandal* betrays the sexual scenario that entices viewers through a dangerous and provocative black/white sexual union. It interrupts the potential pleasure produced through consuming the narrative of Olivia and Fitz without considering the function of race. I will further explore how the sexual script gestures to notions of pleasure in the coming pages. I offer it here to briefly demonstrate how any gratification incited by rooting for Olivia and Fitz’s relationship independent of race cannot be actualized; the sexual scenario is always in play.

In this way, the sexual script functions as a form of didactic operation for how race is applied to our understanding of Olivia Pope as a black leading lady and a sexual subject. As Schechner contends, the script belongs to “the domain of the teacher” (8) or that which is instructive. Schechner’s analysis is concerned with the way a script, as a



“pattern of doing” (7), helps retain the efficacy of a performance event. What is useful in his work is the way the script, as opposed to the drama (or scenario) is wholly dependent upon the messenger. As Schechner explains, whether the transmission of a message is conscious or not, the maintenance of the performance code determines its overall success. What this detailed explanation suggests to me is that the sexual script employed within *Scandal* establishes a narrative pattern whereby the audience is continually confronted with the ways race impacts their own understanding of Olivia Pope’s sexuality. As a black leading lady and as the show’s protagonist, Olivia Pope becomes the messenger of racial discourse. Through the sexual script, she routinely enacts or disrupts codes that emphasize where race instructs how the character accesses and displays her sexual subjectivity.

To summarize my argument: Olivia Pope is novel as a black female protagonist in television. Her character is grounded in a narrative driven by an illicit interracial sexual affair. *Scandal*’s audience is comprised of majority non-black viewers, yet remains one of the most-watched shows among African-Americans. As such, I center Olivia Pope’s sexuality and her interracial affair as the reason behind *Scandal*’s popularity. I contend the sexual script routinely punctuates moments in the show wherein race becomes integral to how the audience responds to the affair. Doing so forces the audience to confront how race informs their own recognition of Olivia Pope as a sexual subject. Given this frame, I will now turn to a more exacting analysis of this argument by demonstrating how the sexual script structures Olivia Pope’s sexuality and desirability, and how this prompts consideration for scripting love.

## SCRIPTING SEXUAL SUBJECTIVITY

When *Scandal* premiered as a mid-season replacement for ABC's Thursday night line-up, there was no guarantee the series would return in the fall. This tentative renewal led producers to approach the first season as a seven-episode British miniseries with a clearly established beginning, middle and end.<sup>68</sup> The weekly format of the show follows Pope and Associates as they solve crises for the episode's adjoining subplot: defending a decorated Republican Marine who faces murder charges because he fears coming out as gay; saving a corporate executive's son who attempts to buy his way out of a rape accusation; and clearing the name of a recovering alcoholic pilot after she is killed in a plane crash.<sup>69</sup> The center of tension, however, rests with Olivia's affair with President Grant and each moment of client crisis across the span of the season serves to reveal more of their backstory. Therefore, in order to provide viewers with a "complete and total story,"<sup>70</sup> the first season needed to reveal the beginning of Olivia and Fitz's relationship and provide answers to a lingering murder case.

The penultimate episode of season one, "The Trail," performs the labor of addressing the aforementioned storyline and solidifying how the sexual script constructs the black leading lady's sexual subjectivity. For much of the first season, Olivia's professional persona and hero status are the focus of each episode. In "The Trail," however, the narrative shifts to concentrate on Olivia and Fitz's romantic and physical

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<sup>68</sup> This is according to *The Huffington Post* on May 11, 2012, released one week prior to the season one finale. See Maggie Furlong's, "Shonda Rhimes'..."

<sup>69</sup> This format shifts slightly in the second and third seasons as more episodes focus on the internal conflicts of Pope and Associates and the White House administration as opposed to outside clients.

<sup>70</sup> See Maggie Furlong, "Shonda Rhimes'..."

chemistry. I consider this intimate refocus through the sexual script as a way to reveal the depth of Olivia's subjectivity by way of sexuality and sexual desire. Rather than continue to arrive at a perception of Olivia Pope as the unparalleled "fixer," the sexual script exploits this redirection on Olivia's relationship with Fitz to access other parts of her personality and subjective positioning. This intervention via the sexual script is critical in that it not only undermines the prevalence of stereotypical imaging of black womanhood in television by imbuing Olivia Pope with what would be classified as "positive character traits." Rather, I see the sexual script as expanding the work of media arts scholar Beretta Smith-Shomade who links identification of subjectivity in black female television characters with the ability to ascribe agency to their fictive reality (*Shaded Lives* 23). Moving away from the professional, therefore, enables the sexual script to act as a device that draws out the layers of Olivia Pope's personality informed not only by her job, but by her personal and professional relationships, her affinity for popcorn and wine, and why she must maintain such a disciplined lifestyle.<sup>71</sup>

Through this process, the sexual script acts as a protective device in situating sexuality within the narrative progression of the series. Black women are rarely portrayed as nuanced subjects in mass mediated forms, and if they are instilled with a sexual sensibility, it is often as an *object* of sexuality (Mask "Monster's Ball"). Given this, the concept of a black leading lady as a protagonist, let alone a figure that could be characterized as a sexual *subject*, is one that requires vigilant watchfulness. As

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<sup>71</sup> It is important to note that details of Olivia's personal life are slowly revealed throughout the first three seasons of *Scandal*. I believe delayed introduction of Olivia's father, Rowan Pope, as well as extended time in Olivia's home, are included in the device of the sexual script and should be further explored in future iterations of this work.

demonstrated with Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal black female citizenship, the black leading lady is an imaging primed for navigating normativity while offering a sense of novelty. I believe the sexual script works on behalf of this objective to allow audiences time (in this case, across the span of season one) to settle with the notion of an imaging of black womanhood that is markedly different from precedent. In one of the only studies exclusively devoted to examining black women in television, Beretta Smith-Shomade details how situation comedies like *Living Single* (1993-1998) offered one of the first portrayals of authorial black sexuality. In this way, black women assumed "subject status" in their sexual expressivity (180). What Smith-Shomade and other media scholars have been less apt to investigate are the methods of creating a black female sexual subject, though this is less a fault of their own. Until *Scandal*, black women in television have served primarily as props to black male protagonists or as members of an ensemble. I offer the sexual script to expose the process of revealing black women's sexual subjectivity in a television format via her position as a protagonist and a black leading lady.

The sexual script reaches its full development in "The Trail" as the episode features the first moment of sexual encounter between Olivia Pope and Fitzgerald Grant. Leading up to this pivotal moment, the sexual script is continually revealing the intricacies of its mechanics. As noted earlier, the sexual script establishes the code that regulates audience viewership and, subsequently, (un)veils how race informs this process. In the context of "The Trail," therefore, the sexual script instructs how race collides with sexuality in the development of Olivia and Fitz's relationship. The sexual script elicits

this maneuver in several ways: First, the sexual script mimics the building sexual tension between Olivia and Fitz by purposely delaying the consummation of their physical relationship. In doing so, the sexual script intensifies the effects of longing by the characters (and the audience) in their growing attraction, thereby allowing the secret of the affair (the initial moments of stolen glances, touches, and kisses) to mask the more challenging aspects of their relationship. This, subsequently, enables the sexual script to direct audience sympathy toward Olivia rather than attend to her status as a mistress. In this way, the sexual script enables Olivia to always be on the right side of moral and social order.

The sexual script also draws on the device of narrative flashback to further develop its protective stance. “The Trail” begins in present-day time when President Grant arrives at Olivia’s home to discuss a personal complication that has been unfolding since the series premiere. In the season opener, Fitz must confront a female staffer who has threatened to reveal her affair with the president to the public. Denying the indiscretion, he asks Olivia to intervene on his behalf, and in her uniquely fierce and loyal way, Olivia “handles”<sup>72</sup> the situation by jeopardizing the woman’s social credibility and job security in Washington. Her affair with the president is confirmed, however, when the woman later attempts suicide at which point Olivia’s romantic relationship with the president is also revealed. When President Grant appears at Olivia’s door in “The Trail,” his accuser – whom Olivia had taken on as a client – has been killed and he has

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<sup>72</sup> When Olivia assures clients that their concern has been – or will be – resolved, she tells them that the situation is “handled.”

received a sex tape from an anonymous source attempting to frame him for her murder. Unbeknownst to the audience, the female voice on the sex tape is not that of the accuser but, rather, belongs to Olivia. The opening scene of “The Trail” quickly transitions into a series of flashing images from throughout the first season that moves the storyline back two years prior to then-Governor Grant’s Republican primary runoff against his opponent, Senator Sally Langston (Kate Burton). The sexual script mirrors the rapid descent of Olivia and Fitz’s romance and, by withdrawing narratively from the immediacy of the present-day conflict, makes way for the sexual script to form an illusionary barrier shielding them from potential criticisms lobbied at their relationship. In other words, the sexual script “walks” Olivia and Fitz to a narrative point of isolation thereby allowing the audience to minimize their attendance to each character’s indiscretions based on professional and personal circumstances.

In so doing, the sexual script begins to sketch how race is, subsequently, also bracketed from this analysis. Ascribing sexual subjectivity to representations of black womanhood is a process that requires reinforcing agential qualities. Additionally, as Lisa B. Thompson contends, in contemporary instantiations of black women’s sexuality, it is critical to understand their construction as “neither pathological nor perfect” (*Beyond 5*). As a sexual subject, Olivia Pope is imbued with an essence of sexuality that is as much her own making as it is projected onto her. Moreover, within the frame of the sexual script, Olivia is equally complicit in the formation of her relationship with Fitz. In fact, throughout the episode their romantic development materializes as a type of cat and mouse game: at any point where it appears as though Fitz dominates the romantic pursuit

it is clear that his interest is being provoked and teased out by Olivia. For instance, before a televised interview with his wife, Mellie, Fitz admits his surprise to not having secured Olivia's vote despite her obvious commitment to his campaign. She responds, in turn, by saying he needs to earn her vote like any other candidate, the subtext implying a reference to her affection. The reciprocated denial of and flirtation with intimacy, enables the sexual script to heighten the presence of tension alongside the boundaries that cannot be crossed during their pursuit, both physically and ideologically.

In heightening the tension of their sexual inaccessibility, the sexual script complicates the utility of the tropes assumed within the sexual scenario of black female/white male partnerships. This narrative tension enables audiences to craft a psychic space that aids in suspending racial interpellation onto the characters. Later in "The Trail," Olivia rushes around the campaign office gathering poll numbers and preparing the staff for Super Tuesday. Governor Grant approaches Olivia and she responds to his greeting with a short, "Good morning." With Fitz looming, Olivia remains focused on her work, never looking up to return his gaze. She avoids him by moving to the other side of the table to talk with a staffer, and the camera pulls back to show Governor Grant on the right side of the frame watching her work. At this moment, the Olivia/Fitz interlude fades in.<sup>73</sup> The musical score is a mixture of piano sounds, synthesizers and electronics. It is cinematic in its affect, an auditory cue prompted by the sexual script to elicit compassion for Olivia and Fitz's seemingly impossible situation.

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<sup>73</sup> The song played during most of Olivia and Fitz's intimate moments in season one is "The Light" by The Album Leaf.

The governor walks over and guides Olivia into a deserted hallway just outside of the staff campaign room. Olivia stands with her back against the wall facing the governor and looking up. Fitz struggles to speak to her, pausing and sighing to get the words out before asking her to stand with him. He implores, “For one minute. Let’s not go back in there and talk, or think, or...for one minute we just stand here and I’m not the candidate and you’re not the campaign fixer. We’re just us.” Through this directive, Olivia is asked to pause her application of their professional personae, thereby allowing space for an ontological essence of their subjectivity to be present (i.e., “we’re just us”).

What I would like to suggest, however, is that this call to suspend professional titles via the sexual script guides the audience to interrupt application of other qualifying identity markers, such as race. “We’re just us” not only gestures toward a presumed “beingness” that supercedes what can be contained in the labels with which people choose to identify. This call also lends itself to contemporary post-racial politics that seek distance from the material and psychological effects of race. From this vantage, “I’m not the candidate and you’re not the campaign fixer,” reframes the narrative in a way that allows the audience to consume the relationship between Fitz and Olivia without the historical distress of miscegenation. In other words, via the sexual script, “I’m not the candidate and you’re not the campaign fixer” readily lends itself to the translation, “I’m not white and married, and you’re not black and working for me.” Moreover, the desire that fuels this tension is what propels the sexual script in prompting this possibility.

Returning to the scene, offers a closer examination into this process: Olivia pauses for a just moment before agreeing to Fitz’s request while standing opposite him,



fully pressed against the wall. Fitz looks down at her, moving in so slowly it is difficult to see the distance between them grow smaller. This is the moment that reflects how the sexual script guides and, presumably mimics, the audience's slow and cautious acceptance of the suspension that is required. At the height of tension, precisely when it seems the governor will kiss Olivia, thereby solidifying the didactic intentions of the sexual script prompted in "We're just us," Mellie appears in the hallway. She turns her head first to look in the opposite direction of Fitz and Olivia, allowing them time to separate and interrupting the ferocity of the tension. It a reminder via the sexual script that Fitz and Olivia cannot exist independent of their identity markers: Mellie needs Olivia's help planning her outfit for the town hall meeting later in the day. Without saying a word, or offering a second glance at Fitz, Olivia smiles in Mellie's direction and walks back into the room. The camera focuses on Mellie who looks at Fitz with a very tight and knowing smile before turning to follow Olivia. Fitz is left standing alone and agonized in the hallway.

The repeated denial of touch emphasizes how the sexual script attends to the myriad reasons certain bodies can or cannot be held together through sexual contact. From this vantage, the sexual script reinforces the narrative's continual circulation of racial nostalgia and historical provocation (i.e., stereotypical norms and contemporaneous novelty). In her excavation of the quotidian articulations of racism through erotic desire, scholar Sharon Patricia Holland employs a reading of William Faulkner's novel, *Absalom, Absalom!*, to examine physical touch as a metanarrative for racial discourse. She contends that touch "manifests itself as the psychic life of difference, transforming

two categories of being (human and nonhuman) into a charged space of pleasure and possibility” (*Erotic Life* 96). Drawing on scholarship in black studies, Holland details how the physical connection between white beings (as human) and black beings (as nonhuman) incites a forbidden act of desire and transformation. This tension between pleasure and possibility is precisely what *Scandal* teases out through the denial of sexual consummation between Olivia and Fitz as witnessed within the operation of the sexual script.

Holland’s theorization of touch identifies how the physical distance between racially marked and unmarked bodies enables a psychological distancing from recognizing how racism is a part of daily interactions. This acknowledgment of distancing applies to the bodies within a frame as well as the witnesses to those bodies. In other words, the bodies involved in the moment of touch are as implicated as those who simply watch the action. As Holland goes on to explain, however, “touch is the sign without a language to make it legible to ‘others’” (105). In other words, the act of the touching physically manifests and then psychologically dismantles the corporeal barriers of racial difference thereby directing attention toward the meaning of those differences when connection is made (104). The way the sexual script delays physical contact between Olivia and Fitz guides and amplifies anticipation of their union along the lines of pleasure. The sexual script implicitly calls into question the origins of this pleasure: does it derive from the script’s careful construction of “authentic” intimacy? Or, does the script reflect anticipation for an opportunity to witness two bodies in a historically prohibited act of contact?

The genius behind the operation of the sexual script within *Scandal* is that the answers to these questions are never completely resolved. In fact, complete resolution would limit the show's accessibility, which, in turn, would affect audience viewership. To definitively respond to questions surrounding race, sex and consumption would require audiences to confront the history of miscegenation, racial trauma, and sexual violence against black bodies. More importantly, answering these questions would necessarily attend to the audience's own complicity in these historic operations. The function of the sexual script, therefore, is to continuously and carefully hold incongruity together. The sexual script relies on the both/and: the action on the screen (or within a frame) is neither as simple nor as complicated as racialized polarities and gendered dichotomies suggest. Requiring *Scandal* audiences to commit their loyalties to either duality of racialized standpoints (i.e., representations as completely racist, or representations as devoid of racial analysis) serves neither industry production interests nor the complexity of contemporary representations of black womanhood via the black leading lady. The purpose of the sexual script is to continuously circulate these perspectives without landing on a fixed point.

### **SCRIPTING DESIRABILITY**

The sexual script not only reveals the importance of crafting the black leading lady's sexual subjectivity but also her desirability. Articulating the conceptual difference between these two concepts is critical for exploring the effectiveness of the sexual script's unique navigation of the black leading lady in television. I believe much of

*Scandal's* appeal is derived from the way Olivia Pope is not only nuanced in her professional and sexual comportment, but also in the way she is framed as overwhelmingly desirable.<sup>74</sup> Discourse surrounding black women's desirability is typically couched underneath narratives of physicality. As K. Sue Jewell reveals, cultural images of black women in the United States are rarely assigned physical characteristics that ascribe attributes of virtue and femininity (*From Mammy* 36). As Jewell goes on to explain, representations of black women are typically characterized in ways that emphasize masculine traits following antebellum emphasis on black women's propensity for physical and reproductive labor (37). This point was addressed in chapter two and Michelle Obama's performance of archetypal black female citizenship. I believe, however, that the denial of physical touch explored in the previous section also acts as evidence for how the sexual script demonstrates Olivia's physical allure. To deprive Olivia of her intended's touch is to suggest that she, as an object/subject of desire, is forbidden – either because she holds extreme value or is incredibly dangerous. Engaging the sexual *scenario* reveals the latter perspective: as a black woman, Olivia Pope's sexuality is a symbolic threat to the stature of President Grant as a white man and leader of the free world. From the vantage of the sexual *script*, however, she is the pursued prize.

Returning back to the moment of the physical breach helps to illuminate this argument. Midway into “The Trail,” Olivia moves to sit next to Fitz at the back of the

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<sup>74</sup> In the March 2012 issue of *Essence* magazine, Shonda Rhimes is quoted as saying she initially thought Kerry Washington was “too pretty” to be cast as Olivia Pope. See, Lola Ogunnaike, “Shonda Rhimes.”

campaign bus after a stop where Mellie publically blamed their lack of intimacy on an unfortunate miscarriage. Fueled by guilt, Olivia apologizes to Fitz for his loss. Fitz informs her that the apology is unnecessary; the miscarriage was, in fact, a lie construed by Mellie to elicit female voter support. He then continues to lament his poor decision in marrying her rather than waiting for Olivia to arrive in his life. Pathological manipulations aside, Fitz's confession performs remarkable work for the sexual script in situating Olivia's desirability. With Mellie as a scheming manipulator, Olivia assumes the position as justifiable romantic preference, the one most deserving of his affection. Although the Mellie/Olivia dynamic is one of the more complicated relationships within the series, a detailed examination into why and how extends the parameters of this chapter. What is important to note in this moment, however, is that in the early part of the series, the sexual script is intentional in positioning Mellie Grant as an antagonist. I believe this is precisely because the sexual script cannot have a viable white woman in contention with the black leading lady for white male affection, particularly one who is in vying for the position of president.

While comparisons between Michelle Obama and Jacqueline Kennedy were necessary for the black leading lady to be legible within the public sphere, such contrasts between Mellie Grant and Olivia Pope would undermine the latter's claim to desirability via the sexual script. This is due, in part, to the fact that Olivia Pope emerged as a black leading lady three years after Michelle Obama entered the White House wherein imaging of the black leading lady had already been established. With Mellie no longer posing an emotional threat, the sexual script leads Olivia and Fitz toward the intentional and

deliberate crossing of the sexual boundary. Interestingly enough, the transgression does not occur through touch, initially, which strengthens anticipation for its incitement while also heightening the aura of Olivia's desirability. In a last attempt at maintaining appropriate physical and professional boundaries, Olivia reproaches Fitz's intimate disclosure with a soft, "Governor Grant..." Acknowledging the false pretense of formality, Fitz asks her to say his name. In Olivia's hesitant, quiet, but conscious and declarative response, "Fitz," the sexual script marks the promise of their physical meeting. The utterance serves as her verbal agreement to the corporeal breach. Olivia whispers, "Fitz," and he slowly reaches toward her. The camera frames their hands as they meet in the middle, Olivia interlacing her fingers with his. A synthesized piano jazz score interrupts the quiet hum of the bus driving along the road as the camera zooms in on their hands, locked in an embrace.

The sexual script's construction of desirability through music charges the longing that propels the characters' actions and the audience's anticipation for their sexual meeting. Moving into the next scene, the music gestures toward a mid-90s smooth jazz track in ways that function much differently than the previously referenced song accentuating their moment of denied touch and inaccessible desire. As they walk to their respective hotel rooms, Olivia stops at her door and hesitates to go inside. The musical interlude underscoring the moment Fitz waits for her to walk away from him, "pretend this never happened," is soft, quiet and slow. The notes of the song mirror a post fight-or-flight sensation and the way a body recognizes the accentuated presence of the heartbeat but with more pronounced spacing. The score pauses while the camera focuses on

Olivia's face as she looks to the door, looks down at the ground, and finally lifts her eyes toward the direction of the governor's room and continues walking toward his door. The rhythmic tap of the symbol enters and carefully paces viewer anticipation of Olivia's decision as the camera jumps between watching Fitz and Olivia enter his room and their initial moments together as he pushes her up on top of a dresser knocking over a lamp, and presses her against the wall while kissing her.

Driven by the sexual script, the music heightens the affect established in the denial of touch and unquenchable desire through a momentum that works to purposely blur the boundary between sexual coercion and intentional choice. As such, elements of racial nostalgia supported by the sexual scenario (i.e., Fitz's influence over and easy access to Olivia) are almost always undermined by specific moments in Olivia's choices (emphasized by the sexual script) that establish her awareness of the implications of their romantic involvement. For instance, Fitz's vocal directives to Olivia (i.e., "say my name," and "pretend it never happened") are subject to the moment wherein Olivia could potentially choose to *not* respond in the affirmative. In fact, throughout the episode, as well as the entire series, it is often Olivia who names, marks, and then oversteps the boundaries of appropriateness and professionalism and does so with the express intent of self-fulfillment. For instance, on the bus, when Fitz asks Olivia to say his name and not his job title (Governor Grant), he turns away from her resigned when he feels she will not bend to his request. The camera shifts its focus to Olivia (with Fitz fuzzily present in the background) as her gaze moves between looking forward, then glancing quietly at him and down into her lap as she hesitates to form his name on her lips. When "Fitz" finally

comes out of her mouth like a whisper, she offers a smile and a quick breath of release. This moment suggests that there is self-gratification in her decision. With the sexual script in operation, the ability to read choice is possible, whereas within the sexual scenario, embodied markers of power and coercion would inherently inform their interracial coupling.

As the moment of sexual encounter continues, the boundaries between the sexual script and the sexual scenario begin to become less pronounced. I offer this as acknowledgment of the way in which the operation of these concepts is not always neat and tidy. Moreover, the shift between their application is not only complicated but fluid. This is important to clarify given the way the sexual script and sexual scenario function in tandem throughout the entire television series. For instance, framed by the sexual scenario, the vocal directives uttered by Governor Grant shift the center of power away from Olivia as the show's protagonist. With Fitz guiding the action of the sexual encounter – pushing Olivia up against the dresser and grabbing her by the wrists before stopping abruptly – their unmarked/marked bodies charge a reading of white male dominance and black female submission. Under his directive, “Take off your clothes,” however, Olivia makes the physical transformation from work professional to an object of sexual subjection and, thereby, a subject of desirability. Recalling that narrative is a device of the script, “Take off your clothes,” leads directly to Olivia's sexual comportment through desirability and does so in ways that obstructs the totalitarian influence of the sexual scenario.



As a sexually desirable subject Olivia Pope becomes, via the sexual script, constructed representationally in ways that undermine the social construction of black women's skin to incite reference to hypersexuality. Via the sexual script, black female subjectivity avoids easy associations with gratuitous and objectified sexual expression. Absent this historic correlation, the black leading lady's sexuality in television takes the appearance as a progressive, if short of radical, presence for black womanhood. Turning to Nicole Fleetwood reveals how "the black female body always presents a problem within a field of vision structured by racialized and gendered markings" (109). In *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness*, Fleetwood contends that the nature of black visibility is marked by what she identifies as the "Fanonian moment" and the (un)knowable blackness produced through seeing and naming a body as "black." This process of designating blackness necessarily produces sexually charged symbolic constructions of black female corporeality. In fact, Fleetwood argues that gendered corporeality is conceptualized in direct relationship to notions of idealized white femininity and, given this, the visibility of black women's bodies is always perceived as a problem. This is precisely the reason why the sexual script introduced Mellie Grant in season one as the relentless schemer. In this way, Mellie Grant, as First Lady and the embodiment of representative white womanhood, absorbs the flaws and criticisms that would necessarily be ascribed to Olivia Pope by sheer nature of her racial identification.

In her study, Fleetwood examines the resistive ways black women in mediated culture embody what she calls "excess flesh" as a performative enactment that "doubles visibility: to see the codes of visibility operating on the (hyper)visible body that is its

object” (112). Fleetwood’s theory suggests that in heightening the effects of the aestheticized black body through excess flesh, the “troubling presence” of black women’s bodies can challenge the disciplinary gaze that anticipates performative markers of black abjection (112). This approach offers a useful model for examining the sexual script’s utility in marking the boundaries of scopic appeal in regard to Olivia Pope’s sexuality and desirability. The resistive practices enacted by the artists featured in Fleetwood’s work help reveal the particular ways in which the sexual script marks Olivia’s erotic subjectivity both independent of and in direct relation to racial signifiers. One of the arguments proffered in this chapter is that the sexual script veils and unveils race in the context of Olivia Pope’s sexuality and her sexual relationships. President Grant’s attraction to Olivia Pope presumes that the problem of black womanhood, evidenced through historically denigrating representations has, in fact, been tempered. In other words, the scriptive effects of desire essentially undermine black presence as it induces inferiority, repulsion, or fear (i.e., “Look a Negro!”).

As such, the sexual script at play, particularly in the moment of “take off your clothes,” reveals how racial signifiers are veiled to obscure the history of black women’s sexual degradation. By very nature of assuming the position of subject of desire, Olivia Pope becomes more in likeness with that of white womanhood. As Richard Dyer candidly claims in his reading of Marilyn Monroe’s star persona through sexuality, to be a desirable woman is to be white (*Heavenly Bodies* 40). Dyer continues to locate Monroe’s visual significations of desirability in her physicality, with her bloneness standing as the epitomized point of recognition because, as he reveals, “bloneness is

racially unambiguous.” In other words, if only white women can be considered desirable, the most effective way to solidify claims to whiteness is through blonde hair.

Absent the ability to draw on this type of physical distinctiveness, the sexual script makes use of costuming to do the work of marking Olivia Pope’s (physical) desirability. In the sex scene, Olivia’s hair is devoid of kink and curl, and is pressed and pulled back into a loose bun at the base of her neck following what Alice Walker identifies as the oppressive “missionary position.”<sup>75</sup> She wears the costume of a corporate and financially successful professional. Her entire body is covered: she wears a long-sleeved collared shirt and black trouser pants. Yet, this respectably gendered-male clothing is underscored by the light pink color and silk material of the blouse along with demure, pearl-drop earrings that hang from her ears. When instructed to remove the attire of her professionalism (i.e., “take off your clothes”) Olivia releases her hair from the constraints of the bun. Doing so signifies the desired (white) woman’s gesture of seduction and perfect submission. She then slowly and carefully unbuttons her blouse to reveal an off-white, craftily stitched bra and panty set with the color of her lingerie acting as a symbolic gesture toward white feminine purity.

What this scene calls into question for the sexual script is how Olivia Pope can be situated as a subject of desire without also evoking reference to what bell hooks would identify as the “ethnic spice” within mainstream (white) televisual constructions of sexuality (*Black Looks* 21). In other words, how does desirability become integral to our

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<sup>75</sup> Alice Walker writes a beautiful, sensual essay on learning about and coming to love the texture of her hair at the age of 40. Her writing is a painful and liberating reflection of a relationship many black women have with their hair as its natural state is routinely forced into styles that “manage” and “control” its movement. See Alice Walker, “Oppressed Hair...”

understanding of the black leading lady as an imaging that supports the disparateness and liveliness of contemporary black womanhood rather than exploit the visibility of racial difference? I believe returning to the moment of the sexual breach will help guide our answers to this question. As the music continues to pulse over the rustling of their movements, the camera splices a variety of shots framing Olivia and Fitz's intimate moment together out of sequence: Olivia undressing herself down to her undergarments then lying on the bed gazing up as Fitz takes off his shirt; a close up of Olivia's face as she offers a shy smile; an image of Olivia running her hands up Fitz's bare chest; a view of Fitz cupping Olivia's face in his hands as he leans in to kiss her; Olivia grabbing onto his rear end; Fitz picking her up and carrying her to the bed. In one particular shot, Olivia is framed in a close up on her back with only the curve of her right breast and the profile of the left side of her face. Fitz's nose is featured slightly in the shot as he hovers above her face. In a moment so inaudible that it would go unrecognized, Fitz can be heard saying, "You're doing [just] fine." Olivia responds with a smile and quick breathy laugh of relief before the camera continues with its artistic editing of their love scene, eventually panning down to reveal a recording device hidden under the bed and disclosing who is responsible for killing the President's former staffer.

I draw attention to this moment for the way the sexual script's intertextuality reaffirms the subjective and agential construction of desirability via the black leading lady. In one respect, Fitz's "You're doing just fine" can be read as a form of comforting encouragement for a first sexual encounter with a new lover. I, however, read this as a break in the chimerical drama, an element of verisimilitude, between Tony Goldwyn and

his co-star, Kerry Washington.<sup>76</sup> The vocal directive, “Take off your clothes,” is assumed to be the only discernable words captured on the sex tape. Yet, the whispered exchange, “You’re doing just fine” is maintained in the elaborate editing of the sex scene without any narrative justification for its inclusion. Intimate scenes between lovers on television and film are notorious for being difficult to produce because they require actors to generate visceral chemistry in an incredibly public format.<sup>77</sup> While the utterance does offer a way to situate genuine affection between Fitz and Olivia, I would like to suggest the moment is really the most effective recovery of black women’s vulnerability via the sexual script.

What makes this gesture toward desirability critical within the construction of the black leading lady is the way it becomes indicative of devotion and nurturance, rather than mere sexual gratification or sexual interest. For this moment to be included within the progression of the sexual script – either intentionally from the dramatized fantasy or as a post-production editing mishap – reveals the possibility of gentleness for and caretaking of black womanhood. “You’re doing just fine” is a reminder from the sexual script that the fantasy and drama of the Olivia/Fitz relationship is activated by two very real bodies, two very real people, co-workers and colleagues whose trust in each other enables them to perform the complicated dance of their characters. Desirability incites

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<sup>76</sup> Kristin Warner writes that audiences watch *Scandal*, not for verisimilitude, but for the fantasy. While I agree with this position, to an extent, I remain wary of consuming television solely from the point of an alternate reality, especially given the stakes of representation and within a genre that makes suspension of disbelief challenging. My introduction of the sexual script offers more tension and flux between reality and drama. For more, see Warner, “If Loving Olitz Is Wrong....”

<sup>77</sup> Kerry Washington reported feeling awkward when filming sex scenes with Tony Goldwyn and that she edits her delivery of lines to be respectful of Goldwyn’s wife and family. See Sierra Marquina, “Kerry Washington...” from *Us* magazine.

faithful loyalty and tender care. The Goldwyn/Washington exchange, “you’re doing just fine,” situates vulnerability for Pope/Washington in a way that recognizes her full subjecthood, and one that requires – by the sexual script – deliberate consideration.

### **SOMETHING AKIN TO LOVE**

Throughout this chapter, I theorized the sexual script as an analytical frame for exploring the erotic subjectivity of the black leading lady. Ultimately, I contend the sexual script operating within ABC’s *Scandal* punctuates racial significations of Olivia Pope’s sexual subjectivity. The devices associated with the sexual script include – but are not limited to – music, costuming, character interaction, narrative and the setting. Throughout the chapter, I demonstrated how the sexual script disrupts easy associations with the sexual scenario, which frames Olivia Pope’s interracial affair with the white President of the United States through a discourse of black subjugation, violence, and racial terror. I claimed the sexual script, operating in tandem with the sexual scenario, both veils and unveils racial qualifiers of Olivia Pope’s character construction. Doing so incites a reading of *Scandal* that offers viewers an element of racial nostalgia (i.e., white male sexual dominance of black women) and alongside historical provocation (i.e., a black leading lady with professional prestige and sexual expressivity). With this foundation, I examined how the sexual script ascribes the black leading lady with sexual subjectivity and desirability. In doing so, I believe the sexual script reveals the possibilities for considering contemporary black womanhood within the frame of love.

Though sex and sexuality are the driving force of *Scandal's* narrative and the character construction of Olivia Pope as a black leading lady, it seems that attending to an affect of love would be an appropriate conclusion to the work of this chapter. This is a risky maneuver, especially given that the concept of love “flies in the face of Western epistemologies” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 162). Because of this, when it comes to scholarship on black womanhood, I believe it can be much easier to discuss sex, especially given the explicit ties between sexual expression and the body. More pointedly, black female sexuality – and black sexuality broadly – with its traumatic and extensive history with and connection to violence makes coupling love to blackness much more daunting. Our perception of black subjectivity is dominated by corporeal significations of blackness through theoretical underpinnings associated with abjection, subjugation, the “seen/scene” (Young 12), and the spectacle. Moreover, access to and domination of the black (female) body through sexual exploitation is the foundation of U.S. ideology, white cultural imperialism and what bell hooks aptly identifies in *Feminism Is For Everybody* as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; it is the opposite of love.

Black feminist scholars have worked tirelessly to resist and revise these dominant ideologies on black womanhood and black female sexuality. To quote Hortense Spillers:

From the point of view of the dominant mythology, it seems that sexual experience among black people (or sex between black and any other) is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes, quite simply, a medium in which the individual is suspended. ...Under these conditions of seeing, we lose all nuance, subjects are divested of their names, and oddly enough, the female has so much sexual potential that she has none at all that anybody is ready and able to

recognize at the *level of culture* (*Black, White, and In Color* 64, original emphasis).

What Spillers articulates with haunting precision is the way black women's sexuality and sexual expression is rarely conceptualized as an act of self-making. In theorizing the sexual scenario, I address this disgraceful truth by exposing the frame that constructs black female sexuality to be for the pleasure and device of others. Alternately, theorizing the sexual script is my contribution to the liberation of black female subjectivity from these very constraints and limitations.

This call to love underscores why *Scandal* is an exemplary text for taking up an analysis of the black leading lady while employing the sexual script as an interventionist frame. Audre Lorde conceptualizes love as tied to the erotic and as a deeply rooted place of power. The historical disenfranchisement of black women necessitates an internally produced energy because, as Lorde contends, it is unlikely to be sourced elsewhere (*Sister Outsider* 53-65). This form of rooted expression would lead to profound freedom and, as the Combahee River Collective statement proclaims, "If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" ("A Black Feminist Statement" 237). As a mass mediated cultural phenomenon, *Scandal* navigates a representation of black womanhood that, I believe, makes an effort to explore what it means to for a black woman to attempt to access this too often ephemeral concept of love: both as a self-produced act of war against oppression or an externally received gesture of protection.



Returning to Olivia's call to Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson and the intentional invocation of racial haunting reveals how the sexual script offers an instructive example for the type of work necessary to escape beyond the strictures of the scenario and toward something akin to love. Olivia's subjective reading of the sexual scenario via race calls critical attention toward the psychic effects resulting from contemporary politics of interracial relationships. Though a concentrated exploration of this extends beyond the parameters of the chapter, I offer this insight to illustrate how the black leading lady can move our audiencing of black womanhood in more expansive ways. Especially for black female audiences, what if Olivia Pope reveals how the black leading lady's popularity is derived from making tangible the possibility of extending value toward black womanhood beyond what Kristin Warner calls, "the fantastical imagining of an alternate world" (19)? What if the truth of Olivia Pope's subjecthood and desirability really can extend into the material livelihood of contemporary black women?

Returning to the sexual script not only exposes how this potentiality is made to manifest but also how it fuels the love for black womanhood. During a flashback sequence toward the end of Season 2, Episode 8, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President," (after Fitz and Olivia reconcile from the Sally Hemings/Thomas Jefferson invocation), the lovers pay a visit to the National Archives to view the original Constitution of the United States of America. Fitz playfully asks if Olivia wants to touch the document. When she responds with a baffled, "No," he tells her that only six people in the last 100 years have ever placed their hands on the Constitution. Leaning in, Fitz whispers, "Be the seventh." Moments later, the camera shifts to frame Olivia's perfectly manicured right hand

hovering just over the parchment as she carefully lets her fingers graze its surface. She offers a quiet, “wow” before Fitz echoes her with his own affirming, “wow.” He begins to read, “We the people...” stopping just short of completing the first lines to continue with, “...It’s just...it’s everything.” As they stand over the document, mesmerized by its symbolism, Olivia smiles and softly exclaims, “It’s a new world.” Fitz looks down at her as he, again, echoes her amazement. The camera holds her in focus as she tears up, and returns his gaze, finally able to say to him aloud, “I love you, too.” They agree to move forward – together – in the complicated navigation of their professed love, as Fitz lightly covers her hand with his and the camera pans up to Olivia’s face.

I would like to think, in some ways, the sexual script aids in cuing moments of symbolic transgressions that support notions of racial utopias, which include but are not exclusively defined by race. Recalling my reference to utopian performatives in the introduction, I reengage this concept here specifically for the way in which utopias act as a gesture of hope. In this way, we begin to understand how scripts mobilize the materiality of the text. Part of what Fitz fails to completely articulate while reading the preamble aloud is that the Constitution claims to “secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” The word, “ourselves,” assumes to mark all who reside in and claim citizenship to the United States. Yet, two sections and three clauses into the founding statutes for this country, black Americans are referred to as counting for only three fifths of a person toward the U.S. representative body. Not only did this clause effectually disenfranchise their call to citizenship, it also divested black Americans of their right to full subjecthood and humanity. These points have been amply rehearsed

throughout this dissertation, particularly in reference to Michelle Obama's archetypal citizenship. I readdress them here to stress how the scripting of this clause led directly to subsequent anti-miscegenation laws, which eventually informed the scenario of black women's sexual exploitation by white men.

Forgiving what may appear to be a hasty abbreviation of history, my point is to say that scripts are primed to be changed. As a blueprint, a code, or a basic patterning, the script points in the direction of action. There is, as Diana Taylor suggests, maneuverability within the social scenario independent of the presence of scripts (55). Yet, in mediums where the script takes primacy (such as television), this type of flexibility is much more difficult to ascertain. Within this contemporary context it is not enough to leave, as Rhimes states, a "discussion of race" to mere embodiment. As such, I see the sexual script as denoting how history's haunting, which is carried in the body and framed by the scenario, can be amended for new possibilities. The sexual script allows Olivia Pope, as a black woman and a black leading lady, to stand next the white President of the United States and touch the physical symbol of U.S. promise. The sexual script re-writes the Constitution into a witness for the creation of what Olivia Pope marvels as "a new world." Only in this case, it is a world that re-shapes the Constitution into an edict that labors on behalf of those who it has historically maligned. From this vantage, the sexual script reveals itself to the black leading lady as a necessary tool for recovering and claiming the right to subjecthood and signifying love black women so rightly deserve.

## Chapter Four: Re-Presenting the Archive in Lynn Nottage's *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*

“You should write it down because if you dont write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist.”

– Suzan-Lori Parks<sup>78</sup>

*By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* premiered in May 2011 at the Second Stage Theatre in New York City. The production served as playwright Lynn Nottage's first theatrical release since winning a Pulitzer Prize for the Congolese war drama, *Ruined*, in 2009. As a semi-historical satire, *By The Way...* tells the fictional story of a black maid and aspiring actress, Vera Stark, who attempts to break into the film industry in 1933 Hollywood. Over the course of two acts, *By The Way...* spans seventy years of U.S. sociopolitical and sociocultural history, landing the narrative in 1933, 1973, and 2003. *By The Way...* is an ambitious production both in scope and in execution. Nottage intentionally blurs the line between fact and fiction through a narrative grounded in a satirical sensibility. Vera Stark is an intricate compilation character that merges the limited archival histories of black women performers in early twentieth century Hollywood into a single story. As a black leading lady, Vera Stark's manifestation in *By The Way...* is the result of Nottage's desire for more expansive imaging of black women in film;<sup>79</sup> therefore, in fictional form, Vera Stark becomes Nottage's demonstration of and response to the film archive's limitations. As such, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* is a unique text for examining the

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<sup>78</sup> From Suzan-Lori Parks's play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*.

<sup>79</sup> In a *New York Times* review of the play, Nottage forcefully situates her work as a demonstration of how early Hollywood films offered more complex portrayals of race relations in the United States. For more on Nottage's conceptualization for the play, see Manhola Dargis, “Just a Maid...” from April 21, 2011.

black leading lady persona across time and history as a strategic navigation of representational politics and black subjective experience.

Accordingly, in this chapter I contend that Vera Stark's significance is derived from the way she is constructed to revisit the subjugated, forgotten and erased lives of black women in the film archive. I illustrate how, in the persona of the black leading lady, Vera Stark ultimately becomes a re-vision of the archive even as she, herself, succumbs to its representational perils. In this vein, I see the character construction and life story of Vera Stark as a (re)negotiation of historical truth within present-day representational politics. I believe Vera Stark's fabrication demonstrates how the archive is employed as a site of truth and how the archive serves as deliberate curation. Marking this distinction between archive as fact and archive as interpretation is important for considering how the black leading lady is shaped within collective memory. As a contemporary instantiation of black womanhood, Vera Stark exposes the potential threats posed to the black leading lady within historical construction. Ultimately, I believe Nottage's archival exploration in *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* operates as an urgent warning. Through Vera Stark, Nottage transforms the stage into a site for reasserting, resisting, and revising the archive's limiting effects. In doing so, her project is a gesture toward the future, reminding us that the way we come to remember the black leading lady is wholly dependent upon how we write her into existence.

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

In multiple sources, Nottage reveals actress Theresa Harris as the inspiration for the character composition of Vera Stark.<sup>80</sup> Nottage claims to have been “struck” by Harris’s portrayal of Chico, the “gal Friday” to Barbara Stanwyck’s character in 1933’s *Baby Face*. In the film, Harris appears as companion and confidant to Stanwyck’s Lily Powers, an ingénue who shamelessly uses her sexual charms to climb her way from a small-town speakeasy to a Manhattan high-rise. Released prior to implementation of the Production Code of 1934, *Baby Face* is touted for its explicit display of sexuality.<sup>81</sup> Adopted in 1930 and enforced in 1934, the Production Code outlined strict guidelines for appropriate film content, which included forbidding profanity, sexual perversity, suggestive nudity, and miscegenation. Hollywood censorship of interracial interactions began as early as the 1910’s in response to the threat of race riots after black prizefighter Jack Johnson defeated white fighter Jim Jeffries. Prior to Johnson’s victory, studio executives screened fight pictures at local movie houses in order to draw in attendees. After Johnson’s unexpected victory, laws were established that prohibited public screening of his fights (Regester, “Black Films” 159-160). In 1927, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) began formalizing self-regulatory practices to recover Hollywood’s failing public image by adopting what was known as

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<sup>80</sup> For a broader discussion on how Vera Stark is modeled after black actresses in the 1930s, including Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, Nina Mae McKinney, and Fredi Washington, please see Ben Brantley, “A Black Actress...”; Michael Phillips, “Vera Stark”; and, Hilton Als “Playing to Type.” For an affective response to watching *Baby Face* while paying closer attention to Theresa Harris, see Dargis, “Just a Maid...”

<sup>81</sup> For more on the film, *Baby Face*, and Barbara Stanwyck’s sexual subjectivity during the Pre-Code era, see *Sin in Soft-Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (1999) by Mark Vieira.

the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls.” This list was later adapted to the stricter Production Code of 1930, which employed language specifically addressing miscegenation.

Susan Courtney’s extensive study on Hollywood censorial practices against miscegenation reveals how the 1934 Code that was eventually enforced four years after the Code of 1930 included a parenthetical definition that specified censorship against miscegenation as “sex relationship between the white and black races” (117). As Courtney finds, even though the revised Code was racially specific, the parameters of “sex relationship” included, but was not limited to, romantic interplay within and outside the sanctity of marriage and general social interactions. Nottage attributes Pre-Code industry standards with enabling the explicit storyline of *Baby Face* as well as Harris’s unparalleled presence in the film. Even though Harris did not have substantial screen time, without the Code to regulate interracial interaction, Nottage found herself drawn to the way the actress appeared representative beyond stereotypical black subservience. Despite the fact Chico was a maid, Nottage contends that she became “something of friend” to Stanwyck’s Lily Powers when embodied by Harris (Dargis). Her interest in the representative possibilities for black actresses spurred by this dynamic led the playwright toward an extensive search into Harris’s personal and filmic biography, only to find the actress limitedly discussed in film histories.

Challenged by the dearth of information on Harris in the archive, Nottage delved into an intricate fabrication of the story that became *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*. The title reads as a double entendre: it bolsters Vera’s position as a protagonist and black leading lady within a present-day context while facetiously mimicking the way she was

continuously overlooked throughout her career. The play follows Vera as she works for “America’s Little Sweetie Pie” and “white” film starlet, Gloria Mitchell. Both women attempt to secure roles in the fictional Southern film epic, *The Belle of New Orleans*: Gloria as the octoroon lead, Marie, and Vera as Tilly, a “slave with lines.” The first act, set in 1933, plays to the conventions of a Depression-era comedy; the second act shifts in tone and form, splitting the stage between a twenty-first century academic colloquium and a staged reenactment of recovered 1973 footage from Vera Stark’s last interview. The play is supported by two elaborately constructed supplemental websites: [findingverastark.com](http://findingverastark.com) and [meetverastark.com](http://meetverastark.com), both of which are the creative works of characters from the play. In addition to this, much of the play’s second-act action is supported by multimedia “archival” remnants of Vera Stark’s life and career, including documentary footage of recovered interviews, and scenes from Vera Stark’s most iconic film, *The Belle of New Orleans*. These constructed “artifacts” perform several works, not the least of which is showcasing Nottage’s exceptional ability as a researcher.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, arranged within the mythology of Vera Stark, the artifacts draw critical attention toward the constraints and erasures attendant to historical accounts.

Perhaps most poignant to the extensive backstory of Vera Stark is what appears in commentary made within a short documentary featured on the website, [meetverastark.com](http://meetverastark.com). Titled, “A Leading Lady in a Maid’s Uniform: A Closer Look at *The Belle of New Orleans*,” the short film explores the lasting impact of Vera Stark’s most

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<sup>82</sup> *The Belle of New Orleans*, for instance, is an idiomatic twist on the 1941 motion picture comedy, *The Flame of New Orleans* in which Harris is featured as Clementine, the maid to Marlene Dietrich’s Countess Claire.



(in)famous film role as Tilly. The documentary continues to build on Nottage's intentional blurring of fact and fiction: it features several prominent, real-life, contemporary professionals, including director Peter Bogdanovich, cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh, and academic scholar Mia Mask, all speaking at length to the mythos of Nottage's heroine. In responding to the question, "What happened to Vera Stark?" Professor Mask, author of *Divas on Screen, Black Women in American Film* (2011), insightfully observes that identifying the truth of Vera Stark is impossible. As evidenced by her own complicity in the fabrication of Vera's story, any claim to truth is slippery. Moreover, Mask's admission reveals that historiographical recoveries are at their best merely incomplete and, at their worst, egregious fictions most often told in service of the teller. What matters, according to Mask, is that the question is being asked at all.

Responses to early stage productions of *By The Way...* reveal the play is often positioned in one of two ways: Critics see the narrative as a form of commentary on the limited roles available to black actresses in Hollywood throughout the early twentieth century; or, the play is viewed as a type of recovery project for black women performers relegated to the margins of film production and, subsequently, erased from film archives and film histories. A review of the show's opening run from critic Hilton Als accuses Nottage of missing an opportunity when crafting the narrative of Vera Stark. As Als contends, the story would have been better served had Nottage "shed her reserve" and extended the revelatory account of Vera's strained position with her employer, Gloria. According to Als, the academically inclined shift of the second act strips the play of its subversive potential in attending to black women's subjective experiences. His critique

can be viewed as a reasonable response to the overwhelming lack of exploration into black women's lives onstage, particularly the "reality" of black domestic workers and their relationships with white women. What his position fails to consider, however, is the futility of such a desire in regard to black representation in a limited archive. Supporting the viewpoint proffered by Mask, and in contrast to Als, Patricia Elise Nelson's review of *By The Way...* at the Geffen Playhouse in 2012 suggests the academic colloquium is, in actuality, about Vera Stark's "complicated legacy, her burden of representation, and the relationship of the artist to the community" (413). Pinpointing "truth" does little to mitigate the poor treatment of black subjective experience onstage or in real life. What continues to be a source of contention, however, is the way affective trauma lingers in light of the lack of detailed documentation.

Regardless of any seeming polarity between Als and Nelson, both perspectives attend to a keen understanding of how *By The Way...* incites consideration for the representational potential of Vera Stark as a black leading lady. Based on her viewing of Theresa Harris in *Baby Face*, Nottage claims that without the Production Code there would have been more expansive representation of blacks in mainstream Hollywood films. This focus on mainstream film does not deny the significance of influential race films and black filmmakers, such as Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams.<sup>83</sup> Rather, Nottage's approach, and my subsequent analysis, attends to the particular manner in which the U.S. film industry historically upholds and circulates ideals of whiteness. As

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<sup>83</sup> According to Donald Bogle, white filmmakers were largely responsible for producing independent Depression-era films for black audiences (*Toms, Coons* 107-108). For more on the cinematic particulars of Oscar Micheaux's work, see Charlene Regester's essay, "Black Films, White Censors" and Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*.

explored in essays featured in Daniel Bernardi's (2001) edited volume, *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, early twentieth century U.S. films played a pivotal role in shaping national and international ideologies on race. Moreover, the "Classical period" Bernardi identifies as these formative years effectively implemented a studio-driven systemization that canonized both white supremacist aesthetics and racialized stereotypes (xiv-xvi). Additionally, as Arthur Knight argues, Hollywood's institutionally racist practices resulted in a drastically differentiated set of qualifications for black stardom ("Star Dances" 390). In fact, Knight contends the very concept of a black star requires the performer to be suspended in "productive tension" between assimilation and black collective identification (398). Given this, conceptualizing Vera Stark as a black leading lady not only necessitates an intimate engagement with white hegemonic interests in film but also requires firmly established familiarity with black signification.

The potential identified in Theresa Harris's performance, therefore, suggests that the black leading lady makes space, both from a place of historical distance and contemporary urgency, to engage the figure of black womanhood in film in novel and necessary ways. Expounding her interest in Harris's portrayal of Chico, Nottage contends, "As an actress, [Harris] was progressive... She was asserting her presence in the films. I wouldn't argue that it's entirely the directors. I would argue that there's something this woman did that was unique that demanded directors pay attention."<sup>84</sup> Though film scholars and critics have attempted to mine the filmic performances of black

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<sup>84</sup> See Dargis.

actresses for their transgressive potential in limiting roles,<sup>85</sup> Nottage's inquiry is unique because of how she responded when her search for verifiability in the film archive failed. By turning to historiographical and dramaturgical manipulation, Nottage assembles Vera Stark to interact with traces of cultural memory and historical truths. In doing so, Nottage constructs a fictive reality for the black leading lady that both adheres to historical precedence, yet carves space for black womanhood to manifest in exciting ways. Within a contemporary context, Nottage constructs Vera to be assertive and magnetic all the while revealing how those attributes were actively stymied in the representative tropes available to black women in a 1930s film. In doing so, Nottage's work illustrates the way black women are frequently subject to the machinations of fiction when severed from archival support. Rather than following archival trend of exploiting such silences to spread denigrated truths about black women, Nottage employs the persona of the black leading lady to manifest possibilities. With this foundation in mind, I will turn to briefly explore the archival landscape that necessitates and incites the emergence of Vera Stark as a black leading lady.

## ACTIVATING THE ARCHIVE

One of the complications that the black leading lady emerges from, and to where Nottage's script attends, is the relationship between the archive and black representation.

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<sup>85</sup> Works by Donald Bogle and Charlene Regester are useful for their interventionist interpretations of actresses Hattie McDaniel, Butterfly McQueen and Louise Beavers. Bogle, for instance, dispels Butterfly McQueen's depiction as a pickaninny arguing that had she merely succumbed to the conventions of a "stock darky figure" she wouldn't have elicited such strong laughter from her audiences (*Toms, Coons* 90). Alternately, Regester approaches Louise Beavers's role in *Imitation of Life* as a type of politicization for black women's liberatory practices (*African American Actresses* 89-92).

Turning to Saidiya Hartman's essay, "Venus in Two Acts," offers a useful frame for understanding Nottage's approach as a playwright. In this work, Hartman attempts to write beyond the limits of the archive while recovering the life of Venus. Throughout the essay, Hartman employs Venus as a metaphorical figure. Her reference is an intertextual gesture toward the "Hottentot Venus," Saartjie Bartman, a black South African woman whose body was exploited and displayed as a public spectacle in London during the early 1800s. Hartman situates her engagement with Venus nearly three hundred years prior as a figurative and ubiquitous presence in the narrative of the transatlantic slave trade. In Hartman's essay, Venus is the unnamed, unvoiced object/body/person, simultaneously everywhere and nowhere ("Venus" 1-2). As illustrated by Hartman, the story of Venus is inextricably linked to an archive of violence – including, though not limited to, sexual exploitation – and death.

In revising the tangible, materially verified conception of the archive into its affective properties, Hartman locates Venus by her relationship to power and dominance. Given this, evidence of Venus's life exists almost exclusively in the form of ship manifests and shorthand accounts of her captors and abusers; Venus has no claim on, or agency in, the creation, circulation, or storage of this information. As such, Hartman contends that to narratively recover the life of Venus from these traces is to necessarily replicate the scene of subjection that creates our knowledge of her existence. Hartman's excavation draws attention toward the impossibility of the unknown and a "reckon[ing] with loss" (4). As she goes on to observe, crafting the story of a life produced in terror with little more than remnants of terror as the very proof of this life would result in what

she describes as a romance (8). The inventedness of such a task would do less to redress the life of the subjugated and would, instead, serve primarily as an exercise of personal consolation for her role as researcher.

Given that Nottage is a playwright and not an historian, it would be a misguided conjecture to assume she holds herself to a similar conclusion. Yet, Hartman's dilemma raises important inquiries into the utility of black histories and historiographies, and is worth putting into conversation with Nottage's project. As Hartman notes, the history of black historical redress "is one of failure, precisely because these accounts have never been able to install themselves as history, but rather are insurgent, disruptive narratives that are marginalized and derailed before they ever gain footing" (13). What Hartman reveals is that history's disciplinary fortitude leaves little space for articulating truths untethered to permanence and "indisputable" documentation. Within the context of *Venus*, this means that a life unverified in the archive can never be considered outside the frame of the imaginary or, as Hartman laments, where this life encounters material and physical destruction. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks speaks to this idea in her dramaturgical encounter with Saartjie Bartman in *Venus*. Parks demonstrates how theatrical re-presentation provides a way to connect *Venus*'s literal and figurative symbolism to contemporary practices that seek to exploit black women's bodies. Harry Elam and Alice Rayner contend that in doing so, Parks makes history present. By this account, the indeterminacy of the archive allows the playwright to claim agency for and resistance in *Venus*'s staged presence ("Body Parts" 280). This is not to suggest that such

an approach is not mired in controversy.<sup>86</sup> Rather, theatrical historiography reveals how the imaginary and the unverified can offer a productive site of constitutive possibility.

In a similar way, Hartman also finds the generative potential within the inevitable failure of her pursuit. As she explains, her intellectual project “[performs] the limits of writing history” as a means of exploring “the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future” (13). In doing so, Hartman challenges the relationship between the archive and representation, drawing our attention toward the requirements for “tell[ing] an impossible story” (10). Applying this approach to Nottage’s *By The Way...* reveals how Vera Stark functions as a response to the delicate position of black women in representative texts, particularly those drawn from the archive. Moreover, this complication lends credence to Nottage’s decision to situate the second act within the environment of an academic colloquium. The spirited and divergent debate engaged over the “truth” to Vera Stark’s life narratively demonstrates the myriad ways in which evidence is collected and arranged to produce the most desirable outcome. Drawing from Michel de Certeau, we can see how “In the case of historiography, fiction can be found at the end of the process, in the product of the manipulation and the analysis” (*Writing* 9). Vera Stark, as a black leading lady, illustrates how black women are always subject to an incomplete and distorted archive. Her fictitious assembly, therefore, is as much a result of Nottage’s dramaturgy as it is a byproduct of historiographical practice.

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<sup>86</sup> Elam and Rayner claim that Parks is, in a way, profiting off the exploitative spectacle of Saartjie Baartman. They quote Parks as responding, however, that ““...Saartjie should not be forgotten, whatever the problems of ‘representation’” (“Body Parts” 269).

When I engage the archive, I am addressing two significations of memory construction. In one way the archive represents a discursive and affective space, like Hartman's archive of violence. The archive can also be referred to as that which is materially constructed through tangible evidence; I believe that Nottage's project addresses both points. First, *By The Way...* is situated within an archive conceptually understood as hostile and denigrating toward the lived reality of black people. In fact, it is through the medium of film that white supremacist ideologies became most widely circulated in the early part of the twentieth century. D. W. Griffith's silent film, *Birth of a Nation*, is credited with dramatizing idealized whiteness and inciting widespread racial antagonisms and anti-black violence wielded by the Ku Klux Klan (Vera and Gordon 266). As film scholar Donald Bogle highlights, novel cinematic artistry fueled the propagandist epic film and its message for white men to act as purveyors of white womanhood, restore the South to its prewar glory and triumphantly rescue the nation (*Toms, Coons* 12-13). Moreover, the melodramatic battle between good and evil became most fervently articulated in the representative bodies of Griffith's brutal black male buck archetype (effectually characterized by a white actor in blackface) opposite actress Lillian Gish as the film's heroine (13). As cultural critic bell hooks asserts, so effective was *Birth of a Nation* and Gish's performance in establishing the prominence and stature of white womanhood that black womanhood in cinema was rendered all but insignificant (*Black Looks* 120). Julie Burchill echoes this alarming argument in her exposition on white women in film, and her pointed critique is worth citing at length here. As Burchill elaborates, in *Birth of a Nation*, Lillian Gish



[is] every inch the smarmy charmer who'd get a monumental kick out of setting up a sub-human ex-slave on a sex assault charge. When Gish leads the Klan's horseback procession after her 'rescue' from rapacious Negroes, her delicate hand on the belt of the leading Hood, her previous frail body, so newly-saved and Born Again, shrouded in white, she is Griffith's vision of impenetrable America, stronger than Britannia, braver than Jeanne d'Arc, more beautiful than any mere mortal (or Northern) woman could ever be, with all of history and hope for the future in her eyes. She is above all *dangerous*; she is an ideal that many American women will go mad trying to live up to and that many American men will commit atrocities for, in this misguided crusade to protect her from anything 'Other' (10-11, original emphasis).

In this way, Vera Stark, as a black leading lady, arises within an archive that not only actively (and materially) negates any trace of her existence but also discursively and ideologically renders impossible the very idea of her manifestation.

Through the frame of historical *fiction*, Nottage is released from many of the archival and disciplinary restraints encountered by Hartman. Moreover, as a theatrical text, the play's narrative necessarily lends itself to associations with slippages of truth. As Harry Elam reminds us, "Theater is built upon devices" ("The Device" 5). The suspension of disbelief in a theatrical space requires that the audience and actors establish what Elam calls a "collaborative consciousness." This co-created reality allows for negotiations between elements of artifice and truth that induce the forward progression of the narrative. *By The Way...* is predicated on a flawed notion of authenticity. For instance, *By The Way's...* satirical sensibility is produced within a contemporary context that understands the limited roles available to black actors in Hollywood, and the proliferation of stereotypical tropes in film, is not an unexplored phenomenon. The parodied personalities of the characters within the play, the well-timed jokes, the lighthearted response to social transgressions of racial passing is precisely what incites

audience criticism toward the white supremacist inclinations of Hollywood films and within a larger social context. The audience does not need Nottage's play to "unveil the truth" of black representation. Rather the comedy of the play requires the audience's clear and conditioned awareness of this reality.

Given this, it would be restrictive to limit explanation of Nottage's work to a project of restitution. In fact, I would like to suggest that Nottage's continual slippage between fact and fiction is her authorial challenge to theatrical spectators to consider the way they consume and audience black life onstage. If this is a play subsumed by asking questions rather than identifying the truth, Nottage's black leading lady requires strategically placed fictions in order to continually push the audience out of narrative complacency. In other words, the play disallows passive consumption thereby prompting the audience to carefully consider the utility of the black leading lady in telling the story of black life in a theatrical context. Echoing the observation of Jacques Derrida, Nottage's historiographical slippages "inspires something else in us about the truth of the truth: about the history of truth, as about the truth of the enigmatic difference...between 'material truth' and 'historical truth'" (*Archive Fever* 59). To continually ask, "What is true?" requires one to take seriously why such knowledge would not be known in the first place. In this way, audiences are prompted to be hyperaware of the stakes associated with any narrative's claim to truth.

As noted earlier, Nottage's assembly of the black leading lady vis-à-vis Vera Stark is the result of her confrontation with archival limitations alongside a *desire* to engender different results from her archival exploration. Especially for those with

personal and political connections to the Black diaspora and transatlantic slave trade, turning to the archive becomes a way to access black representation beyond the stereotyped imaging of mainstream mediation. More importantly, this type of engagement attempts to name and identify the truth of black life with more clarity and, perhaps, with more nuance. What many encounter within this search, however, is silence. Hartman surmises, “Loss [of life in the archive] gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even reparations, perhaps, the only kind we will ever receive” (10). From this vantage the story of Vera Stark becomes Nottage’s self-engineered act of atonement for the history of black women’s filmic representation. Her re-vision of the film archive through theatrical historiography allows for the play’s assembly of a black leading lady to meet with and re-structure black women’s representative ghosts.

Moreover, Nottage’s project reminds us of what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor describes as the archive’s mythic quality. According to Jacques Derrida, a commonly held misconception claims the archive functions as a physical and ideological space that is impermeable and beyond human manipulation (*Archive Fever* 19). The composition of Vera Stark, however, undermines the efficacy of this illusion. Her story within the fictional world of *By The Way...* is predicated on intentional erasures and strategic narrative design. Moreover, Vera’s manifestation is intimately tied to a desire that directly affected how the available archival remnants were perceived and translated into a narrative account. As feminist performance scholar Stacy Wolf illuminates, desire present in archival research “encourage[s] and necessitate[s] active, transgressive

readings, which always happen in historical work but which are denied, masked, or naturalized” (“Desire” 93). Nottage, therefore, demonstrates how desire generates an analytical frame that enables archival failures to transform into stories of possibility.

As a black leading lady, Vera Stark is further evidence of what transpires when yearning and need are forced to encounter insufficiency. As noted in the introduction, the black leading lady persona emerged as response to the heightened visibility and popularity of black women in spaces and mediums they had previously been rendered unseen. Beginning with Michelle Obama as the first black First Lady, and continuing with Olivia Pope as the first black female protagonist of a primetime network drama in nearly forty years, I have explored how the black leading lady is an imaging of black womanhood that attempts to make black women legible and less threatening to mainstream publics. The historically representative tropes of black womanhood – the mammy, the jezebel, the matriarch, and the welfare queen – no longer properly serve to contain blackness within a twenty-first century sociocultural climate. Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that even as the black leading lady adheres to mainstream precedent, she also enacts resistance and does so in a way that those who are unfamiliar with the codifications of oppositional strategies are unable to read. In this way, as I previously suggested, the black leading lady remains transgressive even as she satisfies the needs of those who require some semblance of amenability in black women’s representations. In other words, even as the black leading lady remains a significant figure for marginalized others she is still an imaging prescribed by hegemonic interests. Jacques Derrida claims, “The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge...a

token of the future. To put it more trivially: what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way” (*Archive* 18). By inserting a contemporary black leading lady into the archive and actively demonstrating how she oscillates between truth and invention while remaining symbolic and emblematic of its lionized structure, Nottage activates Derrida’s prophesy for the effects of archivization on material realities. *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* is a re-invention of the archive, one that not only allows the black leading lady to manifest and exist, but also suggests there might be a way for her memory to be the genesis of future imaging of black womanhood. Given this, I will turn my attention to two primary areas of analysis that explore how Vera Stark manifests as a contemporary black leading lady given her relationship to the representative white womanhood and black women’s stereotypical tropes within the 1930s.

#### **CONSTITUTING A (BLACK) LEADING LADY**

Perhaps, most important to the emergence of the black leading lady within the archive is how she is wrested and demarcated from the leading lady construct most recognized in white femininity. With Michelle Obama’s archetypal citizenship and Olivia Pope’s sexual subjectivity, I explored how the black leading lady persona is made known, in part, by her relationship to white womanhood. As the first black First Lady and as the first black female protagonist of a primetime network television drama in nearly 40 years, both Michelle Obama and Olivia Pope, respectively, are manifest in arenas dominated and constituted by white women. *By The Way...* explores this dynamic even more explicitly due to the fact the narrative, as well as Vera and Gloria’s relationship, is

situated in an early twentieth century film context. Because the first act opens in the year 1933, Vera Stark assumes both a visual and ideological counter to the white female film star that came into prominence as a leading lady during this classical film period. As “America’s Little Sweetie Pie,” Gloria Mitchell is the epitomized characterization of a Hollywood starlet insofar as her embodied aesthetic, gestures, and mannerisms can all be seen as codifications of white femininity.

What becomes evident throughout the play, however, is that Gloria’s claim to whiteness is chimerical thereby undermining the circumscription of leading lady idolism of the early twentieth century. The script positions this point very clearly in Gloria’s character description and makes several suggestive references to this guarded secret throughout the narrative. The mystery is not revealed to the audience, however, until the concluding moments of the play when a flashback scene confirms an early second-act prediction that Vera and Gloria are, in fact, cousins. This narrative disclosure is critical to my analysis on how the play conceptualizes a contemporary black leading lady especially because the silence shrouding Gloria’s racial identification is precisely what leads to her successful career. A traditional understanding of narrative progression, particularly through melodrama, assumes that such an admission would occur at the climax of the action, especially given the truth of Vera’s life appears to be the central crisis of the second act. Vera and Gloria’s familial ties are not revealed, however, until the denouement. This would suggest that the climax and second-act crises are actually located with Vera’s recognition (and defeated acceptance) of the way her personal and professional life is intimately tethered to her portrayal of Tilly, a slave. As the critical

point of the play's action, Vera's awareness of her connection to Tilly not only illustrates the disheartening effects of the limited roles on black women's representation in the film archive. It also serves as a point of departure for the black leading lady in a contemporary archival context.

As noted earlier in the chapter, Vera Stark is based on Theresa Harris's performance as Chico in *Baby Face* (1933). In the film, Harris's Chico plays opposite actress Barbara Stanwyck in the role of Lily Powers. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Nottage claims that her interest in Harris developed from the way Stanwyck's character comes to Chico's defense in the opening moments of the film (Dargis). After Lily's father tries to fire Chico for breaking dishes in the kitchen of his speakeasy, Lily forcefully counters, "If Chico goes, I go." Nottage contends this moment inserts Harris into the film as an integral confidant to Stanwyck's machinations rather than relegating her to the periphery of the story. Though limited in screen time and featured as a domestic servant, Harris, as Nottage claims, is captivating onscreen and fails to be overshadowed by Stanwyck. Evidence of this is witnessed early in the film when Chico is seen casually sharing an eating table with Lily while the latter plots to leave her father and his business. Later, when attempting to stow away on a train to New York City, the women are confronted by a security guard who threatens to have them removed; it is Chico's soft and haunting musical hum that covers the sounds of Lily's sexual liason with the guard, thereby enabling their safe passage. When Lily successfully sleeps her way to the top of a beautiful New York apartment, Chico appears onscreen as a maid, but one donning furs and given Christmas day off to spend with her family. With Chico as the

foundation for exploring a more complete articulation of black women in film, Nottage employs the character of Vera Stark in an effort to tease out the complexity of a black female star opposite a presumed white female lead.

In an effort to build on this dynamic and expand the representative potential of Vera Stark as a black leading lady, Nottage strategically unmakes white femininity as a star image. In doing so, Nottage demonstrates how Vera Stark is more aligned with star qualities within a contemporary context while also indicating how Gloria Mitchell fulfills these qualifications for the 1930s. In fact, I believe the efficacy of Nottage's unmaking of white women's stardom is illustrated by the way she utilizes the white characters in the play to expose the labor of the Hollywood industry, particularly with Gloria. I base my engagement with the star image on work by Richard Dyer who explores the "elaborate machinery of image-building" by and through Hollywood actors (*Stars* 17). Dyer's project is useful in the way he decisively locates stardom in film production, and characterizes stardom as a navigation of ideology. As he explains, stardom becomes recognized as a "version of the American Dream" (35) which is always subject to the social, cultural, and political context within which the star emerges. Based on this approach, contemporary audiences recognize how Gloria is framed as emblematic of early twentieth-century idealism in her social comportment. Simultaneously, audiences are prompted to question where this imaging falls short in a contemporary context. This tension is critical to understanding Nottage's re-vision of the film archive and her how project exposes and undermines the ideological machinations of Hollywood through its popular performers. Audiences read how Gloria is perceived as a 1933 film star while



also holding conceptual space for Vera as a black leading lady of the twenty-first century and the play that Nottage has written.

Turning to the dramaturgical mechanics of the play helps to unveil this particular operation of Nottage's archival re-visioning. One of the first narrative interventions occurs in the opening of the play where Nottage activates an intentional "bait-and-switch" of audience expectations toward racialized character types. The scene begins in Gloria Mitchell's living room while she lounges on a chaise drinking heavily. This moment is important for the way Gloria is immediately associated with the "conspicuous consumption" of stardom (Dyer *Stars*, 38) both in her drinking habits and in the aesthetics of her lifestyle. Expanding on analysis by Thorstein Veblen, Dyer describes conspicuous consumption as "the way by which the wealthy display the fact that they are wealthy. It displays not only the fact that they have wealth in the scale on which they consume their access to the canons of taste and fashion but also the fact that they do not have to work" (38). Gloria's elitist association is indicated by her silk dressing gown and the décor of her living space, and is further emphasized when Vera enters the room visually and narratively positioned as Gloria's domestic help.

Yet, when Vera delivers her first line, "Mis,' Mr. Lafayette here to see ya" (7), with the emphasis of a southern drawl, the play reveals its first moment of narrative incongruity within its archival engagement. The title of the play, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, clearly frames Vera as the story's protagonist; doing so guides the audience into a series of assumptions on how Vera is supposed to appear. When she enters dressed in a standard maid's uniform, however, and speaks with the generalizable timbre of "the

(black) South,” Vera’s introduction complicates easy associations with “leading” status as there are very clear raced and classed implications of her regionally ascribed vocalization. Yet Gloria’s response in a similar southern inflection also seems gruffly incongruous, particularly with the backdrop of “deco stylish” furnishings. As the interaction continues, the dissonance between the setting and the language becomes more glaring.

**VERA:** He ain’t want me to say, but he missing ya sum’ting awful –

**GLORIA:** Oh, won’t you tell him to go already!

Wait. (*Tenderly*) Does he look well?

**VERA:** He look real good, Mis’.

**GLORIA:** Did he bring azaleas?

**VERA:** You know he always do.

(*Gloria gasps dramatically.*)

**GLORIA:** And does he know? Did you tell him I’m dying? (8)

The two women proceed in an exaggerated exchange. Gloria gasps, delicately extends her hand toward Vera, and fills her dialogue with extended pauses. In making way for the narrative flip, Nottage manipulates the scenario of the wealthy white socialite and her black domestic help. Abandoning her southern inflection, Gloria asks for a line cue and reveals that the women are, in fact, rehearsing her upcoming audition for the southern film epic, *The Belle of New Orleans*.

By undermining the assumed expectations of interactions between a white employer and her maid, Nottage is able to ascribe Vera with characteristics that demonstrate the playwright’s imaging of a black leading lady within a twenty-first century perspective. Despite her occupational position as a domestic servant, Nottage writes Vera to be witty, intelligent, attentive and detail oriented, all of which are

personality traits that subvert the dimwitted and submissive construction of black film characters in the 1930s, or what Donald Bogle describes as, “the Age of the Negro Servant” (*Toms, Coons* 36). What is noteworthy in Nottage’s decision to prominently attach more assertive characterizations to Vera, all of which speak to her assemblage as a black leading lady, is that these personality traits may very well have been implicit in the daily temperament of black actors during this period in film. In fact, attending to personality is what leads Bogle to claim that it was black “ingenuity” that not only created memorable film characters but also enabled black performers to “play against” the typified black servant (37). Bogle goes on to explain, however, that “the distinctive black servant,” as Vera Stark is conceptualized to be, was a gradual development. He quotes Langston Hughes in describing the relationship between black actors and their directors during the making of early 1930s films: “Upon opening the car door for one’s white employer in any film, the director would command, ‘Jump to ground. ...Remove cap. ... Open again. ... Now straighten up and grin!’” (37). While Bogle’s interventionist reading of servant roles by black actors in the 1930s is a relatively isolated analysis,<sup>87</sup> his work supports Nottage’s dramaturgical conjecture that Vera Stark may, in fact, have been primed for destabilizing servant typification in film, and emerging as a black leading lady before her time.

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<sup>87</sup> In *African-American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility 1900-1960*, Charlene Regester claims that few studies have focused on the intersection of black actresses’ onscreen roles and their private lives. Through representative case studies of black female performers from the early half of the twentieth century, Regester crafts a compelling – if not, at times, improbable – argument for how individual circumstances, politics, and beliefs impacted these actresses’ careers and performances. Her work is a strong supplement to that which is offered by Bogle, particularly in its focus on black women actresses in stereotypical roles throughout the 1930s.

In amplifying this tension between individual performance acumen and the stricture of representative tropes, Nottage demonstrates a keen awareness of the labor required in crafting and sustaining star imaging within an archival context. Evidence of this can be explored throughout the play, particularly in the moments where Vera's display of capability and aptitude reinforces Gloria's frivolity and entitlement. Turning to a scene where Vera attempts to goad Gloria to the studio for an on-time arrival helps to illuminate this point:

**GLORIA:** ... Honestly. And I've told you I'm not wearing the green dress. I wore that to an opening three weeks ago, and everyone made such an awful fuss. It will seem redundant. Oh, bring me the red dress already.

**VERA:** The red makes you look coquettish.

**GLORIA:** Coquettish? Wherever did you learn that word?

*(Vera smiles with a sense of satisfaction.)*

**VERA:** Did you read the script?

**GLORIA:** Of course I did! ... Well, I read my lines.

**VERA:** If you'd bothered to read the entire script you'd know that Marie's not supposed to appear "coquettish."

**GLORIA:** Who cares? I think the red says warmth and fire.

**VERA:** Or that you're horny and desperate.

**GLORIA:** So?

**VERA:** You're playing a dying virgin.

**GLORIA:** *(Beneath her breath)* All the more reason to be horny and desperate, don't you think?

**VERA:** Then do what you'd like. I'll go "fetch" the red dress (12-13).

Attending to this moment is important for revealing the way Vera embodies the black leading lady's resistive traits and also for marking how race is situated to enhance these dynamics. First, Vera fervently undermines the acquiescent qualities that her occupation as a domestic would otherwise assume. As K. Sue Jewell explains, black women domestic servants were generally more contentious only during *intraracial* interactions. When communicating with a white employer, however, any infringement on proper

social codes would result in the black servant being “reprimanded and remanded to her obsequious status” (*From Mammy* 42). Vera, however, is “perfunctory” in exhibiting kindness toward Gloria though it hardly seems driven by fear of punishment.

In fact, throughout the play, it is clear that Gloria is not in a position to chastise Vera for her perceived interracial transgressions. This is due, in part, to Gloria’s overt dependency on Vera in the way she navigates daily life. This is also the result of Gloria’s racial illusion as a “white” starlet. In this way, Gloria’s inability to fully assert racial superiority not only reveals her failure as a legitimate star (thereby solidifying Vera’s prominence as a black leading lady), but also indicates the hierarchy of labor based on racial identification. In the final scene of the first act, Gloria hosts a gathering in an attempt to convince the producer, Mr. Slasvick, and the director, Maximillian Von Oster, to cast her as the lead, Marie, in the *Belle of New Orleans*. Gloria enters the scene fueled by her usual antics: sneaking sips of gin to protect her “sweetie pie” image and yelling to Vera for emotional support.<sup>88</sup>

**GLORIA:** I can’t go back out there. I’ve run out of conversation. It’s awful, Vera. I went deep into my reservoir, and you know it doesn’t go very deep. I can’t do it –

**VERA:** Honey, you know your problem, you don’t realize how damn lucky you are. Mr. Slasvick’s out there for the taking, and with a little flutter of your eyelashes you can have everything you want.

**GLORIA** (*Dismissively*): Oh bother, you don’t know how much work this takes. It’s exhausting to be this fabulous.

**VERA:** Then shove over, sister, and let someone else do it for a change. I’ve had to bite into a lot of sour apples since I’ve been out here, and you don’t hear me complaining. (36).

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<sup>88</sup> Interestingly enough, Gloria’s inconspicuous consumption of gin is a nod to Barbara Stanwyck as Lily Powers who, in *Baby Face*, would pretend to dislike alcohol when offered a drink by one of her suitors because it supported her feigned innocence.

Despite the fact that Gloria is, to a certain extent, performing white femininity in ways that adhere to classed and gendered constraints, her complaints do little to diminish the prestige she wields based on the sheer ability to read as laboring in white femininity.

In fact, I would go so far as to argue that Nottage's black leading lady draws critical attention to the qualitative differences in visibility. As feminist performance scholar Peggy Phelan asserts, public prominence via visibility does not necessarily lend itself to increased political power (*Unmarked* 10). Yet, Vera's criticism of Gloria seems to suggest otherwise. In this vein, I see Nottage prompting a critique of the stakes in acquiring leading lady status through her construction of Vera Stark. In the "shove over," Vera asks Gloria to remove her white-identified body from the position of leading lady, but does not consider how the role she seeks to inhabit will, ultimately, require her own social death or archival erasure. As a black woman in the 1930s, there is no social precedent for imaging as a black leading lady and, subsequently, no cause for archival consideration. It would seem that Vera suffers from what Charlene Regester identifies as the "conflation and confusion of the reel and the real" (*African-American Actresses* 4). Drawing on the life of Dorothy Dandridge, Regester argues that Dandridge's desire for social status and privilege only afforded to white women ultimately led to her self-destruction.<sup>89</sup> Despite Dandridge's accomplishments, her personal preoccupation with securing success as a "lead player" eventually resulted in the demise of her film career

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<sup>89</sup> Among the circumstances Regester identifies as contributing to Dandridge's blurring between real-life and screen-life vis-à-vis desire for status includes her marriage to white restaurateur, Jack Denison, and her affair with white director Otto Preminger (282 – 325).

and her personal life. As such, in order for the black leading lady to emerge in her fullness within the archive, it would seem she must be revealed beyond the limits of social perceptions for the role, particularly as they are constituted by racial qualifications.

Through a representative insertion of the black leading lady, Nottage unveils the process by which we are guided to reconceptualize black racialized stardom, primarily by making it a possibility. As Michel de Certeau reveals, the technology of archives is such that “[archives] only show the gap between received ‘ideas’ and [the] practices which will change them sooner or later” (*Writing* 75). As witnessed with Michele Obama and Olivia Pope, the black leading lady asserts herself in ways that demand extreme re-imagining of black womanhood, particularly within mainstream contexts. I consider the archive a mainstream context because, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, archives “help select the stories that matter” (*Silencing* 52). Film archives, especially in the early twentieth-century, gave little consideration for the relevance of black women. Vera Stark, therefore, is the materialization of the practices that amend and revise the ideologies affecting black women in film. In this way, I believe Nottage illustrates how the black leading lady represents only a fragment of the expansiveness still missing in the archival memory of black womanhood. Even as stardom is informed by what Richard Dyer identifies as the intellectual flimsiness of a performer’s ontological “magic” (*Stars* 16-17), the concept of stardom remains culturally, historically, and ideologically specific. To conceptualize Vera Stark as a star, as a black leading lady, requires a knowing sense of her extraordinary appeal alongside how she is primed for these times.

The black leading lady, therefore, is evidence of a progression of resistances that seek to insert black womanhood into archives that have long been recused of accountability in their erasure. Attending to how Vera Stark becomes most fully realized as a black leading lady within the play offers insight into how this occurs. Moments after telling Gloria to “shove over,” Vera is left standing alone as she picks up a silk shawl left behind. Wrapping it around herself, Vera walks to the center of Gloria’s living room, taking stage for an impromptu performance and launching into a rendition of Bessie Smith’s, “Gimme a Pigfoot and a Bottle of Beer.” This moment is provocative for the way in which Vera’s invocation of Bessie Smith activates a history of women whose racial and gendered autonomy became revealed through performance. As Angela Davis’s carefully detailed exploration into African American blues singers in the 1920s and 1930s reveals, the blues acted “as a site for the independent elaboration and affirmation of subjectivity and community for women of the black working class” (*Blues Legacies* 46). Davis goes on to detail how blues women, in effect, asserted a model of black womanhood to counter the pervasiveness of the cult of true womanhood excised by middle-to-upper class white women.<sup>90</sup> Based on this, one could carefully surmise that the black leading lady is a historically rooted expression of autonomy for contemporary black womanhood. Even in her novel emergence as a popular (and positive) imaging of black womanhood, it is critical for the black leading lady to be recognized as an extension of a

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<sup>90</sup> Darlene Clark Hine writes that early twentieth-century black women enacted a culture of dissemblance as a shield against the psychic and material effects of derogatory imaging that constructed black women through negative sexual stereotypes. She goes on to claim that the culture of dissemblance “assumed its most institutionalized form” through the black women club movement, which developed in response to the cult of true womanhood. For more, see Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives....”



genealogy attentive to marginal modalities of subjectivity, even if unrecognizable by mainstream publics.

Within an archival context, the performative evocation of Bessie Smith is also critical in the way it reaffirms a resistive aesthetic into the black leading lady persona. As “Empress of the Blues,” Bessie Smith is renowned not only for her insightful disclosure of black rural and working-class life within her music but also for her unabashed voracity for life. “Gimme a Pigfoot,” in fact, is often seen as a musical homage to Smith’s defiant spirit. As Jennifer Ryan proffers, Smith’s routine references to consumption within her songs along with her “public displays of appetite – for food, alcohol, marijuana, and sex – translated into an open rebellion against social codes” (“Bessie Smith” 17). Angela Davis goes so far as to suggest that Bessie Smith appeared anachronistic to her social environment of the Harlem Renaissance (*Blues Legacies* 160). Davis reveals how Langston Hughes identified Smith as one of the three great voices to have risen during the height of blues music (*Blues Legacies* 145). This, despite the fact that her contemporary, Ethel Waters, is credited with having the more “sophisticated sound” and a popularity that extended from “the northern white population to European royalty” (153). I mention this to emphasize how conjuring Bessie Smith’s spirit in a twenty-first century play and then exporting her to a 1933 archive via Vera Stark provides a clever reinforcement of the black leading lady’s resistive inclinations.

What makes Bessie Smith’s conjuration within the play so arresting is the way it reveals how Nottage’s archival slippages act as a gesture of allegiance to the way Vera’s contemporaries encountered the archive. As explained by popular biographer Chris

Albertson, details of Bessie Smith's personal life went largely undocumented until the 1970s, nearly forty years after Smith's death. Despite being the highest paid black female performer of her time, Smith fell victim to disciplinary biases that failed to recognize her contributions as part of the jazz canon (Albertson ix-xiii). Though Vera Stark was only marginally successful in comparison to Bessie Smith, the progression of the second act colloquium is driven by the film industry's lack of wherewithal in cataloging Vera's relevance beyond her role as Tilly, a slave. Moreover, as the colloquium moderators continue to grapple with the egregious silences in Vera Stark's biographical documentation, the play continues to slip in the limited histories of other twentieth century black actresses: In the recovered footage, Vera discloses that she lost her contract with a production company because of her relationship with her husband; this reads as an indirect reference to actress Lena Horne, the first black woman to sign a seven-year contract with a major movie studio (MGM) in 1942, whose second marriage to a white man remained a secret to the public until shortly before her contract dissolved in 1950 (Register 176-177).<sup>91</sup> Even the panelists' argument over the details of Vera Stark's death appears as a nod to actress Dorothy Dandridge whose cause of death remains largely inconclusive and shrouded in mystery.<sup>92</sup> With every slippage, *By The Way...* serves to

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<sup>91</sup> To read more on Horne's contract negotiation and her marriage to a white musician, see her autobiography, *Lena*, co-authored with Richard Schickel. Also, for a really tremendous essay on employing Horne's autobiography as performance theory, rather than theatre history, see Shane Vogel, "Lena Horne's Impersona."

<sup>92</sup> Most writings on Dandridge's death suggest she died of suicide, which was likely induced by a drug-overdose. Other reports suggest her death was caused by a gym injury, while some – particularly those close to Dandridge – claim she was murdered. See Mask, *Divas on Screen*; Register, *African-American Actresses...*; and the HBO film dramatization, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*.

unveil the complicated constitution of the black leading lady in her careful navigation of racial politics in film.

### **SIGNIFYIN(G) MAMMY AND THE TRAGIC MULATTA**

In addition to delimiting and subverting white women's stardom, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* is tasked with the burden of constituting the black leading lady against and within black women's representative tropes. If the black leading lady is to exist in the archive as an independent entity, she needs to be acclaimed in her own right counter to idolized white female performers. The black leading lady must also be dissociated from stereotyped imaging. Vera Stark's occupational status as Gloria's maid is imbued with a host of banal and denigrated assumptions. Yet, cultural works that attempt to breach the representational fortitude of the mammy/maid/domestic worker, especially, often face difficulty given the historical and sociocultural efficacy of these images. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, one of the primary functions of the mammy trope is to justify black women's continued relegation to subservient positions and, more specifically, their overrepresentation as domestic workers (*Black Feminist* 80). In this way, Vera Stark's development in the archive as a black leading lady is not only dependent upon her relationship with Gloria, but also in how she is manifest in comparison to the other black women characters in the play: Lottie and Anna Mae.

As Vera's roommates, and as energetic personalities consumed in their own pursuit of Hollywood fame, Lottie and Anna Mae's narrative dilemma emerges from the way their bodies inform each woman's social mobility and filmic portrayal. Explored

alongside Vera's fictive crisis, Lottie and Anna Mae offer an *intraracial* counterpoint to examine how the black leading lady materializes in archival form. In holding narrative space as the physically prototypical mammy and tragic mulatta tropes, respectively, Lottie and Anna Mae reveal how the black leading lady enacts her interventionist potentiality: As a domestic servant, Vera Stark – by occupation – reinforces the strictures of her socioeconomic, sociocultural and sociopolitical context. Yet, as a black leading lady, she is also the genesis to expanding black women's archival representation. In this vein, Vera Stark is the embodiment of a black leading lady precisely because Lottie and Anna Mae exist in the play as substitutes for the historically sanctioned representative tropes of the mammy and the jezebel, or tragic mulatta.<sup>93</sup>

Turning to the practice of signifyin(g) helps to illustrate the contours of Vera Stark's manifestation as a black leading lady independent of her stereotyped predecessors. As articulated by Henry Louis Gates, signifyin(g) is literary theory that explains the way African American novelists write within and against the literary canon. Gates explains signifyin(g) is a renaming practice wherein African American literature self-theorizes by gesturing toward its Eurocentric predecessors and, simultaneously, remaining firmly attached to significations of blackness, particularly through the black vernacular. Through signifyin(g), Gates reminds us that “to name [the black] tradition is to *rename* each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to

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<sup>93</sup> Lisa M. Anderson (*Mammies No More*) asserts that the term, jezebel, is rooted in scientific discourse to extrapolate the connection between race, gender, sexuality and colonialist conquest. The tragic mulatta, in contrast, refers to imaging of a mixed-race black woman whose narrative outcome always results in tragedy, which is usually linked to the presence of her black parent's blood. For the purposes of this work, the jezebel and tragic mulatta are used interchangeably as the tragic mulatta in film was very often portrayed as a hypersexual, light-skinned, mixed-race black woman.

revise, and to revise is to Signify” (*Signifying Monkey* xxiii, my emphasis). Adapting Gates’s literary theory to theatre, Harry Elam demonstrates how signifyin(g) theatrical texts offer a useful site to critique and revise the African American theatrical and cultural past (“Signifyin(g)” 292). Using George C. Wolfe’s *The Colored Museum* as an exemplar text, Elam demonstrates how Wolfe’s play exhibits the intertextual features of Gates’s literary proposition. Elam’s work is useful in the way it expands the concept of text to include both the cultural symbolism and gestural references that appear in Wolfe’s theatrical productions. In this way, *The Colored Museum* is not only “talking” to other black plays as dramatic texts, but also to the ways in which each of those plays function as a critique of larger black sociocultural experiences in their own right.

Applying Gates’s literary theory to Wolfe’s play demonstrates how *The Colored Museum* is an artistic exploration of and confrontation with the complexities of black history that are informed by both self-made expressions of black identity and colonialist impositions of racialized Otherness. Within the context of Nottage’s work in *By The Way...*, Vera Stark – as a black leading lady – can be seen as offering a signifyin(g) critique of black actresses in film. By nature of her character construction, Vera Stark talks through and with the archived histories of black women performers (and, on occasion, black male performers) on stage and in film. As such, Nottage’s balance of truth and fiction, informed by the archive, and employed by the manifestation of the black leading lady, functions as a signifyin(g) theatrical practice.

One of the immediate ways in which *By The Way...* enacts a signifyin(g) approach through the black leading lady is by enabling Vera Stark to make broader

connections to black subjective experience. More particular and, perhaps, in ways more explicit than appear in the analyses of Michelle Obama and Olivia Pope, Vera Stark's direct and personal engagement with Lottie and Anna Mae prompt an intertextual movement through the socioeconomic, sociopolitical and sociocultural climate of black life the 1930s. Collective U.S. history situates the 1930s within the devastating impact of the country's economic collapse leading up to the Great Depression. Though President Franklin D. Roosevelt's enactment of the New Deal in 1933 lead to implementation of policy that effectively benefited poor and working class Americans, particularly black Americans, the presence of Jim Crow laws stymied sustained and widespread racial advancement (Alexander 44). Given this, in addition to the psychic violence enacted by the ubiquity of racialized stereotypes circulated through film and theatrical performance mediums, black Americans also found themselves subject to institutionally sanctioned police brutality and mob-incited lynchings.

This context is evident when Vera returns home to her shared apartment with Lottie and Anna Mae, and arrives too late to catch the radio broadcast of a favored program. As Vera settles in from her workday, she explains the cause of her delay:

**VERA:** Hey, Lottie, you're never gonna believe what happened. The streetcar got stopped on Central, there was nearly a riot. The police were swarming all over the place. Heard someone say a fella got stabbed at the market. They were plucking Negroes off the streetcar like cotton.

**LOTTIE:** There's always something going on down there. Did they catch 'em?

**VERA:** I didn't bother to stick around to ask. Got a ride with Dottie's man (17).

This verbal exchange, set in the minimally explored theatrical setting of a black living room invokes an effective articulation of the routine violence against black bodies along

with the fraught relationship between state authority and the black community. References to this historical climate, though brief within the play, remain integral to Vera Stark's signifyin(g) and pro-black political engagement as a black leading lady.<sup>94</sup> As evidenced by Michelle Obama's archetypal citizenship and Olivia Pope's sexual subjectivity, part of the black leading lady's character composition rests in her ability to remain rooted in a black sensibility. In referencing black sociocultural and sociopolitical experience, Nottage circumscribes the complexities of the black leading lady's ability to critique and revise the archive through her signifyin(g) position. More pointedly, Nottage demonstrates the dialogical relationship between black representative texts and the lived reality of navigating anti-black oppression. Nottage's signifyin(g) archival revision, therefore, is as intimately informed by systemic and institutional anti-black racism as it is the well-circulated imaging of its terror that black actresses were required to embody.

This signifyin(g) engagement continues as the play draws concentrated attention to various forms of intraracial tensions informed by the politics of colorism manifest in film representation. Part of why the black leading lady becomes framed as an anachronism within a 1933 film context is due, in part, to Nottage's restricted engagement with the mammy and mulatta figures. In thinking about the trajectory of black women's representation in film, it is curious that Nottage does not invoke the persona of Blaxploitation "divas," or the refurbished black mammy of the

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<sup>94</sup> In the second act of the play, Vera expresses a more developed radical politic. She identifies the designer of the dress she wears on the talk show as a "young Negro designer" (66). Vera also discusses marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and being one of the first black actresses in Hollywood to address Civil Rights. This could be considered a gesture to the politics and activism of Lena Horne, who is well-known for her activism in the 1960s.

multicultural/colorblind eras of the 1980s and 1990s. I would like to suggest that by locating the narrative temporally in 1933 and 2003, Nottage is better able to demonstrate how Vera Stark engages a signifyin(g) critique of Hollywood industry casting practices, particularly during eras when black actresses were institutionally sanctioned for offering film portrayals that were most prominently aligned with mammy and mulatta imaging. Hattie McDaniel, for instance, became the first black actress to win an Academy Award for her supporting role as Mammy in *Gone with Wind* in 1937. Substantial industry acclaim did not befall a black actress again until 1955 when the Academy nominated Dorothy Dandridge for Best Actress in a lead role for her portrayal as the “apotheosized mulatta” in *Carmen Jones* (Bogle *Toms, Coons*, 166). Not until Halle Berry’s polarizing role in the 2001 film, *Monster’s Ball*, however, did a black woman win an Oscar for Best Actress in a lead role.<sup>95</sup> The historic moment was, unfortunately, mired in controversy: critics of the film denounced the award as glorification of the tragic mulatta figure as Berry played a black woman who loses her son and then becomes romantically involved with the (racist) white prison guard responsible for executing her husband. From a contemporary perspective, therefore, Nottage’s signifyin(g) engagement with the mammy and mulatta by way of the black leading lady not only critiques and recovers representative tropes through Vera Stark’s divergence from precedent. Nottage also mobilizes the same effects in the character constructions of Anna Mae and Lottie.

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<sup>95</sup> Berry also received critical acclaim for her stunning portrayal of Dandridge in the HBO film biopic, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*. Her performance earned her a Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actress in a Mini-Series or Motion Picture Made for TV, and an Emmy for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Miniseries or Movie in 2000. Ironically enough, the tagline for the film featured on promotional material read: “Right Woman. Right place. Wrong time.”



As the embodiment of the tragic mulatta, for instance, Anna Mae is narratively responsible for demonstrating the porous boundaries of black identity. Unlike Gloria, Anna Mae is described within the play as retaining some of the phenotypic markers of blackness that restrict her ability to completely assimilate into whiteness. To break into the film industry, then, Anna Mae must exploit her physical traits in other ways. Throughout the first act, Anna Mae is involved in an elaborate ruse to attract the attention of a major studio executive in the hopes that her intimate relationship will translate into a prominent film role. She is introduced in the play with a flurry of activity in preparation for an evening out:

**VERA:** Where you going all spiffed-up?

*(Anna Mae, demonstratively, twirls)*

**ANNA MAE:** The double-D, darling. Dinner and dancing

**LOTTIE:** She's got a date.

**VERA:** Tonight? Who? He must be something, looks like you broke out the expensive rags. (18).

When Anna Mae's date arrives, however, it is revealed that her meticulous primping is done not only to hide her humble living arrangements but, rather, because her suitor is a white man.

**VERA:** (To Lottie) What's with her?

**LOTTIE:** He don't know she colored.

**VERA:** Ya lyin'.

**LOTTIE:** Am I? Ask her.

**VERA:** OOO-WEE. This has the makings of a might good tragedy.

*(Anna Mae puts on Vera's coat.)*

**ANNA MAE:** Only in the movies, sugar, only in the movies. In real life one Anna Mae Simpkins gets to eat clams on a half shell, sip champagne from crystal and dance all night to the Starlight Orchestra. (21).

Anna Mae's playful dismissal of her racial deceit (i.e., "Only in the movies, sugar") not only draws awareness to the tension implicit in the play's navigation of reality and fiction within the archive. Her flippancy also reveals the importance of the narrative boundaries that constrain the mulatta figure in representative texts, particularly in film. Moreover, Vera's call to Anna Mae's tragic demise demonstrates how the practice of signifyin(g) both relies on the strength of history while allowing for possibilities to make it strange.

Through Anna Mae's activation of the tragic mulatta trope, *By The Way...* illustrates the trajectory of black women's imaging in film moving out of the era of black subservience. As noted earlier in this chapter, Hollywood implemented the Production Code of 1934 as a type of industry self-regulation. The parameters of the Code outlined strict guidelines prohibiting the filmic display of certain behaviors and subject matters, with a notable focus on miscegenation. Enforcement of the Production Code and anti-miscegenation restrictions ended 1956, which coincided with the release of *Island in the Sun*, a film that is widely remembered as inciting the proliferation of interracial couples in film throughout the 1950s, particularly those between black women and white men (Courtney 193). Susan Courtney's extensive and exacting investigation into Hollywood depictions of miscegenation throughout the first half of the twentieth century reveals that filmic regulation of mixed-race interactions served, primarily, to "fortify and protect white male identity" (*Hollywood Miscegenation* 10). Moving into the 1950s, however, Courtney contends that the widespread, "spectacular" display of interracial relationships was invested in demonstrating how women of color became positioned as the purveyor of white men's salvation. In the Pre-Code era of 1933, therefore, Anna Mae is the embodied

signification of heightened anxieties toward black transgression into white social contexts while also symbolizing the futurity of black women's film representation.

Perhaps what is most provocative in the play's signifyin(g) excavation of the tragic mulatta image is in how she demonstrates the dangers of representation. In order for a narrative trope to be effective, it must reach the same resolution across stories. Briefly reviewing the history of the mulatta helps to reveal her utility in literary form. In *Mammies No More*, black feminist theatre scholar Lisa Anderson charges that the tragic mulatta figure functions differently in the white imaginary as opposed to the black imaginary. Tragic mulatta figures crafted from the dominant white gaze appear tragic because the existence of inferior blood traces renders them deficient in a white supremacist context. In contrast, the tragic mulatta constructed from the vision of black imagination incites tragedy because her conception is too often the byproduct of her black mother's rape (49-50). Anderson goes on to note that in more contemporary renderings, the mulatta's tragedy is the result of her inability to reconcile the incongruity of her disparate worlds (50). Anderson also contends that during the early half of the twentieth century, three tropes of mulatta existed within the white imaginary: the mulatta who desires to advance her social position by marrying a white man and suffers a tragic demise (as is the case with the main character from *The Belle of New Orleans*); the mulatta who denies her connection to the black community and is melancholic; and, the exotic, mysterious, sexually deviant mulatta.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> For a detailed examination to the tragic mulatta vis-à-vis both the white and black cultural imaginary, see Anderson, *Mammies No More*, 45-84.

Given Anna Mae's trajectory within the play, it appears as if Nottage is not exclusively devoted to extrapolating any singular articulation of the mulatta figure. In fact, Anna Mae can be viewed as balancing along a number of axes of tragedy. Harry Elam summarizes signifyin(g) as "repetition with a signal difference" ("Signifyin(g)" 292). Applying this to Nottage's engagement with the mulatta imaging enables Anna Mae's trajectory in the play to become clearer. First, her phenotypic features reinscribe the history of trauma from forced sexual encounters between white men and black women. Additionally, her marked physicality requires her invocation of a flimsy Brazilian accent, thereby making her a "passable ethnic other." Moreover, Anna Mae provides a focal point for exploring intraracial colorism. In protest to Anna Mae's relentless pursuit of white male suitors, Lottie exclaims, "There are half a dozen upright Negroes chasing [Anna Mae's] straight-ass hair" (21). This quick reference acknowledges the elite social position Anna Mae occupies by virtue of her physical proximity to whiteness. For example, a darker-skinned black man's partnership with Anna Mae would signify his own upward mobility within the black community and, subsequently, Anna Mae's heightened social status. Lottie goes on to comment on how Anna Mae prefers to consort with any "ofay" she encounters, a derogatory term used by blacks for white people. This demonstrates how Anna Mae, as a mulatta, is able to distance herself from identification with blackness if she so chooses. It would seem, therefore, across the span of a short interchange that Anna Mae embodies all the potential dangers associated with the fictional mulatta. Yet, the signifyin(g) "signal difference" reveals itself because Anna Mae's "tragedy" is such that she is merely on the brink of *all*

tragedy; Nottage never allows any harm to befall the character within the trajectory of the play.

Similar signifyin(g) practices in *By The Way...* can be uncovered in Lottie's embodied articulation as the phenotypic mammy compared to Vera's occupational maid. This distinction reflects the way in which Lottie, described as dark-skinned and heavy set, serves as the physical comportment to Hollywood's conventional standards for black women in early twentieth century film. As the scene in their loft continues, Vera reveals to Lottie the script, *The Belle of New Orleans*. Because the film is set in the plantation South, the script has the added benefit of featuring "slaves with lines" (22). The comedic interplay established between Lottie and Vera over the career opportunities available to "slaves with lines" enables Lottie to offer pointed commentary about the realities of black actors in Hollywood. While asking if she could possibly find herself cast in the film, Lottie launches into a singing rendition of "Go Down Moses." Vera politely tells her to "put away the big voice" as the film is not a musical, but remains encouraged because the production team is looking for unknown actors to cast as slaves (22-23). Lottie, however, is skeptical toward the film's ability to deliver on such large promises.

**VERA:** Turn up your nose, but I'll put it this way, a couple of the Negroes actually get to say something other than "yes'um" and "no'um."

**LOTTIE:** Seriously? Ya lying! You count the lines?

**VERA:** Watcha you think?

**LOTTIE:** And?

**VERA:** Got tired of counting.

**LOTTIE:** Get outta here!

**VERA:** And...Gloria says, they wanna make a discovery.

**LOTTIE:** Shucks, honey, they ain't even gonna sider nobody like you or me. We been here too long to be discovered.

**VERA:** Yeah, how do you know?

**LOTTIE:** How do I know? How do I know? You think I came all the way out to Cali' to sew labels into cheap shirts? (24).

This launches Lottie into an experientially based critique on the film industry at the expense of Vera's unyielding optimism. Lottie prattles on about her extensive resume, including a stint on Broadway and time spent performing at the Alhambra, a Harlem based theater that served as a vaudeville venue in the early 1900s.

**LOTTIE:** I was in the Broadway hit *Suzie Jane*. Kay East called me the best damn shimmier in all of New York City. I did *Blackbirds* with Doris Mills, the engagement at the Alhambra. (24).

In this, Nottage acknowledges and challenges the exclusionary performance spaces for black female actresses and performers. Lottie's delivery of "Go Down Moses," therefore, is signifyin(g) on musical performance acts (perhaps through minstrelsy) as the primary access point for black performers in early forms of popular entertainment. Noting time spent performing at the Alhambra supports this conjecture. Most notably, given the overwhelming exclusion of black performers from popular vaudeville stages (Brown 123-124), Lottie's disclosure lends credence to her performance acumen and offers the signifyin(g) revision by ascribing her with a reputable resume. Many of the productions listed in Lottie's performance career are reflections of the play's larger machinations: Doris Mills is actually a twist on black variety stage actress Florence Mills, who starred in Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds* revue in 1926 (Brown 247).<sup>97</sup> Regardless of archival validity,

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<sup>97</sup> It is interesting to note that, according to Jayna Brown, there are "no film or musical recordings" of Florence Mills and that accounts of Mills's performance acumen are derived primarily from European and U.S. show reviews and accounts from Mills's co-performers (Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 245).

its inclusion supports Lottie's skepticism and reluctance to embrace Hollywood's inclusionary promises.

Even more telling is the play's subtle acknowledgment of the industry's practices with regard to racial representation.

**LOTTIE:** ... Shucks, I played Juliet for a group of Pullman porters in Chicago, and received no less than two marriage proposals on closing night. You may not believe this, but I had a slender pretty figure when I first come out here. Yes, indeed. Had to fight off the fellas. Fight 'em like ole Jake Jefferson. (24).

Nottage includes textual references that situate Lottie's precarious career positioning in Hollywood within preferred black representational frames. Her distinguished resume is valuable only in so far as it offers intrinsic satisfaction. As Lottie goes on to proffer, "...You gotta be high yella mellow or look like you crawled outta Mississippi cotton patch to get work in this rotten town. So here I am, or should I say here [I] is, seven years later trying to eat my way into some work" (24-25). In one sense, Lottie's observation of Jake Jefferson links her own personal and professional experiences to the cinematic introduction of the pacifying Mammy as the preferred representation for black women. As noted earlier, African-American boxer Jack Johnson's shocking defeat of white prize fighter, Jim Jeffries, initiated Hollywood censorship of black/white interactions in film (Register "Black Films"). Lottie's understanding of the limitations of black women's representation, therefore, is traced directly to larger sociopolitical battles related to industry censorship and the eventual implementation of the Hays Production Code.

Moreover, taken in conjunction with Lottie's admission on her physical transformation to fit industry precedent, the play reveals the intricate relationship

between the archive, performance and embodiment. Lottie's attempt to infiltrate the Hollywood scene as a black woman necessitates her adherence to physical type. In many ways, Lottie's character gestures toward the way her body in its mimicry of form represents the fleshed and embodied limits of black imaging through filmic representation. She reflects, as Rebecca Schneider contends, the way "performance [acts] not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance" ("Archives" 103). In other words, Lottie's full, dark figure is the way the film archive not only remains constant but is continuously re-created.

The poignancy leveled in Lottie's critiques becomes critical to Vera Stark's signifyin(g) enactment as a black leading lady and how she interrupts the narrative codes of the mammy/maid trope present within the play. When Lottie discusses eating herself into work, she is addressing the way her dark skin required excessive weight so that she could embody the only roles available to her based on physicality. The performative significations necessitated of Lottie as a dark-skinned black woman in film is determined by the visual, aural, and physical preferences of industry mandates. Hollywood and cinema draw their appeal from formulaic re-production wherein the visual is offered as a reaffirmation of the gaze's desire. As evidenced by the play and confirmed by Lottie, industry desire is that for tragic blackness (i.e., the mulatta, "high yella mellow") or pacifying blackness (i.e., the Mammy, "crawled outta Mississippi cotton patch"). While the practice of fitting body type to industry standards for women of any race is neither novel within a contemporary setting or in reference to historical trend, Lottie's personal disclosure functions as a critical archival reference for the signifyin(g) critique offered in



*By The Way*.... As film historian Donald Bogle reports, *Imitation of Life* actress Louise Beavers regularly overate in an effort to maintain her plump figure in accordance to the Mammy (*Toms, Coons* 63). Given this, by including Lottie as a textual reference to the physically prototypical mammy, Vera Stark becomes the proposed reconfiguration of the black visibility onstage and in film. In juxtaposition to Lottie, Vera structures the mammy/maid image as an occupational condition rather than a determinate resolution. From this vantage, Vera Stark is the signifyin(g) response to the film archive's extensive reserve of black women in domestic roles. Her emergence as a black leading lady is the re-vision of signifyin(g) influence.

#### **ON THE VERGE**

“‘History is a question constantly being rephrased.’”

– Herb Forrester, *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*<sup>98</sup>

In the closing moments of the play, Vera and Gloria are ushered back to the 1930s in a flashback scene from their time on the set of *The Belle of New Orleans*. Leading up to this break in the second act, the narrative splits the stage between two time periods: a 2003 colloquium discussing the representative impact of Vera's role as Tilly, a slave, along with her film legacy and life biography; and, an enactment of footage from Vera's last interview on a popular television talk show from 1973. Throughout the interview segment, Vera appears visibly hardened and unflinchingly candid. At one point, she jokes how her disclosure about kissing a white man could possibly lead to cancellation of the talk show. Rather than evade the controversy, Vera offers a soft apology to the host

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<sup>98</sup> Herb Forrester is one of the colloquium participants and the fictional creator of the website, MeetVeraStark.com.

explaining, “I’m going to finish my story.... (71).” The colloquium presents a challenging juxtaposition against the interview as the participants move through the “footage,” pausing the video intermittently to reflect on Vera’s composure and forthrightness with the show’s host and guests, including a surprise visit by Gloria.

The colloquium panelists are left to conjecture when the rediscovered footage comes to an abrupt end, shortly after Vera’s heartbreaking admission that “Tilly is [her] shame....and [her] glory” (89). The panelists enter into an argument with each person trying to wield definitive truth to claim over the fact of Vera’s life and her portrayal of Tilly. Without substantial evidentiary support, however, the colloquium participants are prevented from reaching even the semblance of a thin conclusion. Herb Forrester, the panel moderator, cuts everyone off, closing the event with this final thought: “What happened to Vera Stark? In the words of that wise old sage Grandford Ellis, ‘History is a question constantly being rephrased’” (92). The stage then transforms into the 1930’s movie set of *The Belle of New Orleans* showcasing Vera and Gloria as young, hopeful actresses rehearsing lines and reminiscing about their early performance days.

Even as the final moment between Vera and Gloria confirms fragments of their complicated history, most particularly their familial relationship, the conclusion also offers a haunting platform for the futurity of the black leading lady. Throughout this chapter, I demonstrated how Vera Stark’s fabrication offers a way to understand how the archive both reveals truth and enacts intentional curation. I argued that through the character construction of Vera Stark, Lynn Nottage exposes the potential limits to the black leading lady within the construction of collective memory. In devising Vera Stark

to encounter and meld with the representative tropes of black women in film, along with traces from the lives and careers of the actresses who portrayed them, I claimed Nottage employed the theatrical stage as a site for sustaining and upending the archival erasures of black womanhood. Ultimately, I contend that even as Vera Stark is forced to yield to the strictures of her sociocultural context and, by proxy, its archival edicts, she emerges within a contemporary frame that recognizes her as a black leading lady. In doing so, Nottage provides Vera and, by proxy, the black actresses she meets along her archival excavation, a way to claim the prominence and esteem that history and the archive have worked so diligently to constrain.

*By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* is a play that asks its audience to consider the effects of history, historical construction, and memory. More importantly, it is a play that mines those effects for how they shape the livelihood of black women. My decision to conclude this dissertation with Vera Stark and the archive is precisely because of the way the play's narrative converges with how I grapple with the black leading lady as a(n) (in)valuable (in)visible subject. Vera Stark gained prominence and was remembered most endearingly for her award-nominated performance as Tilly, a slave. She knowingly and eagerly assumed the stereotype under the (arguably) naïve belief that it would lead to greater professional opportunities. Yet, within the construction of the play, Vera is left with a mediocre 40-year career, the details of which have been relatively obscured. Even as she claims to have “opened doors in Hollywood” (85), she, herself, was largely neglected by public memory beyond her embodiment of an imaging whose legacy is still

being battled today.<sup>99</sup> If, as I have argued, the black leading lady is an imaging of black womanhood for contemporary times who – in her popularity and visibility – reshapes public perception of black women’s subjectivity, what makes her different than the representative tropes of history? In other words, how will the black leading lady prove to stand the test of time in the way that Vera Stark, in the 1930’s, could never really achieve?

This is a question I see posed at the end of *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*, as a way for Nottage to challenge audiences into producing the most constructive answer. Rehearsing together, Vera and Gloria come to a definitive decision on the intention behind the delivery of their final lines. Gloria, whose character Marie is dying, whispers, “I’m free, Tilly. I’m free!” Under the charge of their director, this line is supposed to be indicative of situational freedom or, as Vera explains, freedom “from life and its burdens” (93). The two women, however, decide to make the line imply release from prejudice. Like Gloria, Marie is an octoroon, and is passing for white. In her response, which also happens to be the closing line to the film, Vera – as Tilly – says, “Stay awake...and together we’ll face a new day.” The stage directions move Gloria and Vera back into the film scene, where “*the camera moves in on Vera, thinking, preparing,*

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<sup>99</sup> In 2011, DreamWorks Studios released a film adaptation of the *New York Times* bestselling book, *The Help*. The story focuses on an aspiring white female journalist who writes a book based on interviews with black domestic workers in Mississippi during the 1960s. The film received several Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture. Actress Octavia Spencer became the fifth black woman in the Academy’s eighty-four year history to win the award for Best Supporting Actress for her role as Minnie, one of the featured maids. In an open letter, members of The Association of Black Women Historians called the film’s popularity “contemporary nostalgia” for black women’s domestic subordination.

*questioning*” (94, italics in text). Offstage, directions are yelled at the production team and the actors. Nottage then writes:

*(Camera moves close to Vera’s face, on the verge...)*  
(Offscreen) Action. (94).

In offering this closing image, Nottage presents Vera Stark, as a black leading lady, in her most primed form. She concludes the play at the inciting moment of possibility and then, through “Action,” appears to compel audiences into response. *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* is a public call to honor in memory and in daily practice the brilliance of the black leading lady.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

“And [the black woman] had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.”

– Toni Morrison<sup>100</sup>

“Black women are from the future.”

– Saeed Jones<sup>101</sup>

On June 27, 2015, activist Bree Newsome scaled a flagpole on South Carolina’s state capitol grounds and removed the Confederate battle flag. Newsome’s act came ten days after nine people lost their lives in a ruthless anti-black massacre inside the Emanuel AME Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In the days following the shooting, media outlets circulated photos of the killer posed with the Confederate flag. Almost immediately, national debate reignited over the continued display of what many have long come to view as a symbol of domestic terrorism. Particularly in South Carolina, where the Confederate flag had been flying on state capitol grounds since 1961, activists, civil rights leaders, and government officials – including South Carolina governor, Nikki Haley – emphatically called for the flag’s removal. In an effort to demonstrate the urgency of the call, and in tandem to recent Black Lives Matter activist protests, Bree Newsome took to the flagpole in a defiant act of civil disobedience.

Even though Newsome was arrested and charged with defacing government property, there were many who praised her actions as courageous. Ava DuVernay,

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<sup>100</sup> See the essay, “What Black Women Really Think About Women’s Lib,” from Toni Morrison’s, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*, (24).

<sup>101</sup> Saeed Jones is a poet and author to *Prelude to Bruise*. He is featured in Best American Poetry 2015 and is currently serving as BuzzFeed Literary Editor. This quotation was included as a caption to a photo of singer Solange Knowles’s wedding party on Jones’s Twitter feed from November 17, 2014.

director of the critically acclaimed film, *Selma* (2015) – a dramatization of the historic voting rights marches in 1965 – referred to her as a “black superhero.”<sup>102</sup> The Internet was instantly flooded with artistic renderings inspired by Newsome’s defiance. One of the most circulated images came from a young Kentucky illustrator named Niall-Julian Watkins. His rendering of Newsome is striking in its simplicity – and its ferocity. In the illustration, Newsome is depicted wearing a gray-black jumpsuit reminiscent of the all-black ensemble she wore on the scene at the state grounds. Gone from this imaging, however, are the harness and helmet that stabilized and protected her climb. In Watkins’s illustration, Newsome is seen gripping the top of the flagpole with only her left hand while the right hand holds the Confederate battle flag down along her side. There is soft neutrality to the coloring of the image including the pole, her outfit, and even the brownness of Newsome’s skin. Newsome’s thick dreadlocks whip behind her as she looks below. The only semi-stark coloring appears in the sketch of the Confederate flag. Given the overall subdued tonality of the drawing, however, the flag materializes next to Newsome’s side looking aged, tattered, and stripped of the glory its proponents have long sought to install as sacrosanct. Underneath the image is the word “Still,” a reference to lyrics by rapper Lupe Fiasco honoring black women activists.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Shortly after Newsome’s arrest, the hashtag #FreeBree trended on the social media site, Twitter. DuVernay is quoted as tweeting, “I hope I get the call to direct the motion picture about a black superhero I admire. Her name is @BreeNewsome.” See Melissa Locker, “Activist Bree Newsome....”

<sup>103</sup> Niall-Julian Watkins’s image of Bree Newsome was featured on the website, Upworthy, an online publication committed to mining social media platforms to distribute news that would otherwise be overlooked by mainstream media. Watkins is quoted as saying on PRI.org: “I think everyone was kind of waiting for someone to have the courage to take [the Confederate flag] down, so when it happened, everyone looked, and was like, ‘Thank you.’” See Jared Goyette, “Artists Explain....”

Bree Newsome's heroism from the summer of 2015 is not just a profound display of contemporary civil rights activism. In fact, I have offered this lengthy meditation precisely because I see Newsome as demonstrative of the momentum of the black leading lady. As illustrated throughout this dissertation, there is a causal and intertextual progression to each subject's emergence. Even without an explicitly direct correlation between Michelle Obama's reverence as First Lady, and Olivia Pope's sexual subjectivity on television, or Vera Stark's archival composition, under the guise of the black leading lady, they are dialogically interactive. Framed by imaging of the black leading lady, the subjects of this study talk through and with one another, with each providing greater nuance to the contours and complexities of contemporary black womanhood. My intent in situating Bree Newsome into the black leading lady's mobilization is directly informed by how she presents an amalgamation of citizenship, sexuality, and archival confrontation. Bree Newsome substantiates my belief that the black leading lady is not an isolated emergence and that, with care, she can be a useful guide for conceptualizing the futurity of black womanhood, not just in the United States but abroad.

The subjects featured in this dissertation reveal how the black leading lady acts as the singular embodiment of seemingly dissenting modalities of existence. In one respect, the black leading lady is representative of abject subjectivity located at the intersection of race (her blackness) and gender (her womanness). Yet, in the public's unparalleled acceptance of her visibility, the black leading lady also unveils herself as a force of reckoning. Moreover, as emphasized by Bree Newsome, the black leading lady is inherently performative. She exemplifies what Elin Diamond refers to as the "doing and



the thing done” (1). Tracing how the black leading lady enacts archetypal citizenship, sexual subjectivity and desirability, and archival re-visioning, reveals how this contemporary persona is conceptualized through the essence of her making. In other words, she is a black leading lady not only because she is installed as such but also because of what she *does* to constitute her emergence. The stereotyped tropes and controlling imagery of the mammy, the jezebel, the matriarch and the welfare queen are based, primarily, on the distorted circulation of racist, sexist, and classist discourse. As a black leading lady, however, Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope, and – to an extent – Vera Stark, are engaged as agential subjects. Even as they respond and acquiesce to hegemonic precedent, as black leading ladies, they continue to hold space for their own particular constitution.

Returning to Bree Newsome’s act of civil disobedience demonstrates how imaging of the black leading lady will continue to move beyond what, at times, appears to be a narrow assembly of personhood in the black leading lady persona. Particularly with the subjects featured across this dissertation, the black leading lady materializes precisely because she never presents herself to the public beyond the scope of the unthinkable; she stays within the confines of what society can accept. Anthropologist Michel Rolph Trouillot defines the unthinkable as “that which one cannot conceive within the range of possible alternative, that which perverts all answers because it defies the terms under which the questions were phrased” (*Silencing* 82). As I have demonstrated throughout the dissertation, avoiding the unthinkable has led to imaging of the black leading lady that is legible only within the confines of what is overwhelmingly

normative. This remains to be true despite how the black leading lady appears as a racialized deviation from that established norm and is necessarily transgressive in her own right.

In retrospect, this appeal to normativity proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of my early engagement with the black leading lady persona, especially given how resolute I felt in naming her manifestation as wholly subversive. Because the black leading lady offered a way to engage black womanhood beyond the lens of subjugation, I struggled to understand how she revealed herself at the interstices of both radical and normative. In fact, knowing that I desired a more imaginative assembly of this persona, I routinely found myself questioning beyond the scope of the present work: How does the black leading lady claim citizenship to, let alone be representative of, a nation while being *openly* critical of its failures? How will the black leading lady's sexual subjectivity and – by proxy – desirability be informed beyond Eurocentric frames? Can we collectively – and justly – honor black womanhood in its disparateness, rather than requiring its contained homogeneity? Where is space made for a queer sensibility? Most importantly, how does theorization of the black leading lady resist being limited to the three subjects featured within this dissertation? With these questions in mind, I offer the following concluding remarks and reflections on this contemporary moment of the black leading lady. Since my identification of her emergence in 2008, I believe the black leading lady has sustained remarkable changes in her imaging. By inserting Bree Newsome, and other qualified contemporary black leading ladies, into my larger

argument, I seek to illuminate a pathway to these answers in ways that lead us to a richer understanding of the black leading lady's utility.

First and foremost, Bree Newsome's demonstration on the South Carolina state grounds suggests the black leading lady will continue to make claims to citizenship by erupting the containment of its ideology. Michelle Obama demonstrates how the performance of archetypal black female citizenship molds the black leading lady into a figure who makes claims to the nation by adhering to cultural and temporal precedents of gendered norms while simultaneously fashioning critiques against racist constructions of citizenship from the margins. The performance of archetypal black female citizenship provides Michelle Obama with legibility as the first black first lady and as a symbol of U.S. womanhood. Though less explicitly, Olivia Pope and Vera Stark also make references to citizenship, but in decidedly intersectional ways. Sexuality has long been the axis upon which people engage conceptualizations of black womanhood. The representative tropes of the mammy, the jezebel, the matriarch, and the welfare queen are all intimately engaged with sexual discursiveness, thereby substantiating sexuality as the frame through which rights to citizenship are predominantly bestowed upon black women. The archive, as a determinant of memory, has long operated as a conceptual and physical space intent on misremembering black women in the historical account of the nation's establishment.

With all of the subjects in this dissertation, therefore, archetypal black female citizenship operates by exposing the boundaries of democratic sovereignty. In each case study, the featured subject reveals how a particular entry point into black women's

representative and subjective experience – citizenship, sexuality, and the archive – leads to an encounter with larger systemic processes affecting their enactment of and access to these liberatory claims. Newsome, therefore, demonstrates how imaging of the black leading lady will continue to amplify our attention to – and further unravel – the seams of U.S. citizenship. With overwhelming consistency, the black leading ladies of this dissertation were dissuaded from engaging in an abrasive confrontation with ideologically and systemically sustained notions of citizenship, particularly along the axes of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Bree Newsome, in contrast, reveals how the black leading lady propels the performance of archetypal black female citizenship by making claims to democratic subjecthood that are less concerned with pacifying racial anxiety in mainstream spaces. In fact, I believe Newsome shows how acknowledging race is integral to asserting individual sovereign rights.

Through this ideological eruption, I also believe the black leading lady will demonstrate how to expand the geographical territory of citizenship's reach. The subjects of this dissertation are decidedly U.S. centric. As such, the discussion of citizenship, sexuality, and the archive are circulated around a restricted understanding of black women's subjective experience. As imaging of the black leading lady develops, I am interested in how she will further articulate a diasporic sensibility. I believe the subjects of this dissertation reveal how it is not enough for the black leading lady to be solely a figure of U.S. nationality. I arrive at this conclusion because the issue of access to the fullness of subjective expression for black women occurs at the same point of entry globally, even if the details of State disenfranchisement are disparate. The confrontations

encountered by the black leading lady are, inherently, structurally produced, and as M. Jacqui Alexander reminds us, “no matter our countries of origin, decolonization is a project for *all*” (*Pedagogies* 272, original emphasis). To speak from a place of diasporic mobilization around concerns of citizenship is a decidedly black feminist liberatory practice.<sup>104</sup> In this vein, the black leading lady can be seen as a figure that incites consideration for interlocking obstructions within constructions of citizenship across the nation and beyond.

In a statement released exclusively to Blue Nation Review just after her arrest, Newsome writes candidly about her decision to remove the Confederate flag. She discusses her time spent traveling across the country, speaking with black communities reeling with grief over the onslaught of brutality and terroristic violence against black Americans, particularly over the span of the past year.<sup>105</sup> She explains:

I removed the flag not only in defiance of those who enslaved my ancestors in the United States, but also in defiance of the oppression that continues against blacks globally in 2015, including the ongoing ethnic cleansing in the Dominican Republic. I did it in solidarity with the South African students who toppled a statue of the white supremacist, colonialist Cecil Rhodes. I did it for all the fierce black women on the front lines of the movement and for all the little black girls who are watching us. I did it because I am free.<sup>106</sup>

Bree Newsome boldly – and rightly – positions herself as a “global citizen.” This is precisely how I view the black leading lady’s progression, particularly through the

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<sup>104</sup> This is offered in reflection of Audre Lorde who writes, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different my own.” See Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” in *Sister Outsider* (132-133).

<sup>105</sup> The activist movement Black Lives Matter began in 2013 after George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin. The movement grew during the summer of 2014 following a string of deadly encounters between police officers and unarmed black Americans, including 47 year-old Eric Garner, and 18 year-old Michael Brown. The atrocities of deadly police violence continued into the spring of 2015 leading up to the shooting in Charleston, SC.

<sup>106</sup> See Goldie Taylor, “Exclusive: Bree Newsome...”

performance of archetypal black female citizenship. In this vein, citizenship will not be denoted by the way boundaries are erected as an exclusionary practice. Rather, claims to citizenship will require a commitment to connectivity. Such a process will, I believe, enable us to conceptualize the black leading lady's citizenship not only as a self-constituted claim to black women's humanity but, rather, as a claim that openly acknowledges the humanity of all who live and work on the fringes of society.

Furthermore, these calls to citizenship proffered by the black leading lady will be revealed as expressly dependent upon issuing a critique against historical national grievances. One of the overarching conditions of the women featured in this dissertation is that their position as a black leading lady always presents a challenge to the rote circulation of normative practices. As I demonstrate, however, the success of their intervention arises from the way they direct their critique toward the center. Moreover, they do so in a way that attempts to deflect attention away from how their own, individual, operation at the center is widely construed as deviancy. In her statement, Newsome details how organizers staged her ascension up the flagpole by agreeing it must be a black woman to remove the flag while being supported on the ground by a white male ally. The history of social organization understands white men as ideal citizens, mostly at the express disavowal of black women's right to assert this identification. Yet, in Newsome's demonstration, black womanhood is literally and figuratively elevated to her claim to citizenship on the ground support of white masculinity. What this suggests to me is that the black leading lady will continue to place social injustices on display by subverting their operation: Michelle Obama claims the White House as her home;

through Olivia Pope's scripted desirability, she declares and accepts love from a white man in front of the U.S. Constitution; Vera Stark merges the histories of early twentieth century black actresses in film to give visibility to their erasure, as well as her own. More importantly, as evidenced in the closing moments of each chapter throughout the dissertation, these subversive acts are reliant upon calculated, interconnected, anti-oppression work, with careful attention to the operation of privilege.

In the process of adhering to normative precedent, the black leading ladies included in this work are all ascribed with a physicality, style, and social comportment that align with Eurocentric predilections. In the early stages of theorizing the black leading lady as a mainstream figure of black womanhood, it became very clear that the physical markers of black womanhood would be limited within the construction of this persona. This critique is offered with a clear understanding of the risks attendant to qualifying particular stylistic choices (or requirements) as expressly black – or non-black, for that matter. This comment is also made with great delicacy as I wrestle with how to engage the politics of representation and black women's bodies without replicating the violence of objectification. I would be remiss, however, to not challenge the physical homogeneity of the subjects of this dissertation. Most notably, all of the black leading ladies featured in this research are depicted with straight hair, including Vera Stark who is visually represented on the cover of the play's script (released in 2013) by actress Sanaa Lathan. In fact, I have distinct memory of being in casual conversation with multiple people during the second season of *Scandal* – many of whom are black women – marveling over the scene where Olivia Pope is shown sitting on her bed, in her bathrobe,

with curly, wet, un-pressed hair.<sup>107</sup> Behind skin tone, black hair is widely perceived as the fundamental marker of racial difference. The conceptual disparity between these two physical markers, however, is that hair is generally seen as a feature that can be controlled and changed. This has resulted in many black women enduring long, painful and, often, expensive procedures and treatments to alter the appearance of their hair, thereby enabling easier assimilation into the mainstream. As such, if the costuming and physical comportment of Olivia Pope, along with Michelle Obama and Vera Stark, are indicative of how black women become scripted as desirable subjects, what room is there for differently expressed bodies and styles in the conceptualization of the black leading lady?

In chapter three, the sexual script and sexual scenario were proposed as a way to illustrate the composition of Olivia Pope's sexual subjectivity in mainstream television. Though the concepts were introduced to explore black women's sexuality, I would like to expand their engagement here while offering a more explicit link between black womanhood, sexuality, sexual subjectivity and physicality. Since the black leading lady's emergence in 2008, there has been a noticeable shift in what is construed as desirable imaging in black women. In tandem with the arrival of the black leading lady in highly public platforms, there has been a surprising rise in black women's natural, non-chemically treated hair styling.<sup>108</sup> In fact, one of the most powerful moments in television since Olivia Pope's arrival came during the 2014-2015 inaugural season of Shonda

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<sup>107</sup> See *Scandal* Season 2, Episode 15, "Boom Goes the Dynamite."

<sup>108</sup> A report released by the Mintel research group reveals that sales for chemical treatments on black hair declined 26% from 2008 to 2013. See Christopher Muther, "Chemical-Free..."



Rhimes's law drama, *How To Get Away With Murder* (HTGAWM). Airing on Thursday nights after *Scandal*, the series stars actress Viola Davis, a woman who has openly critiqued the film and television industry's racist, sexist, and ageist casting practices, and who regularly discloses how she has spent most of her career feeling marginalized for being a darker-skinned black woman with a non-conforming body.<sup>109</sup> In the series, Davis's character, Annalise Keating, is portrayed as a smartly dressed, successful attorney and professor of law. She is married, and she garners the respect of her students and employees (albeit, slightly grounded in a deep-seated fear of her wrath), and is frequently shown in the passionate throws of an affair with a very attractive black man. Whereas the sexual script operating within *Scandal* cautiously guides audiences into their understanding of the black leading lady as a sexual subject, the sexual script within *HTGAWM* offers no such pretense. Davis/Keating is a sexy – and sexual – black leading lady.

In the fourth episode of the series, Davis's character, Annalise Keating, displays a striking moment of vulnerability when she removes her makeup and her wig before confronting her (white) husband about his sexual indiscretion. During an interview panel featured on the show, *For Your Consideration*, Davis takes full credit for the scene's inclusion, explaining,

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<sup>109</sup> Shortly before the completion of this dissertation, Viola Davis became the first black woman to receive an Emmy award for her performance in *How to Get Away With Murder*. Davis opened her acceptance speech quoting Harriet Tubman, and then went on to say, "You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there. So here's to all the writers...who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be black." A transcript of her entire speech can be found in the *New York Times*. See Michael Gold, "Viola Davis's Emmy Speech."

There was something for me that I didn't buy about Annalise in private. It felt like who she was in private had to be diametrically opposed to who she was in public. And so in order to do that, I felt like I had to physically take the wig off. I mean, I [personally] have no eyebrows. I have eyelashes that I put on, and there was something extremely vulnerable about that act — and I know it seems like a very simple act at the end of the day — but for me, that simple act really surmounted to something very powerful in the end, because what it was, was someone being very, very private in public.<sup>110</sup>

While I do not pretend to believe that discriminatory practices against black women's protective styling and natural hair has been eradicated in the workplace or in general social perceptions, I am interested in how this moment speaks to the way the sexual script prompts reconsideration for the boundaries of desirability. Davis is – literally – scripted to take off every physical enhancement that would otherwise enable audiences to read her dark-skinned body as conventionally desirable. In her raw exposure, Davis/Keating prompts an encounter with revisionist truth. She reveals how the sexual script calls into question the way desirability is claimed without an appeal to normative fashion. In this vein, I recognize the wig as mere adornment to an essence that Davis/Keating claims regardless of how it is made perceptible to others. In other words, the sexual script appears to create a frame for how the audience is made to read the black leading lady's desirability but, in actuality, operates in service of the black leading lady's self-affirmation in the fullness of her sexual subjectivity.

It remains to be seen how the black leading lady will be scripted to continue to push the boundaries of anticipated public demeanor of black womanhood, particularly along the lines of physicality. Yet, I remain encouraged that her imaging will persist in

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<sup>110</sup> For more on Viola Davis's approach to her character, see Diane Gordon, "Viola Davis...."

reflecting the range of bodies, skin tones, and styles of the disparate realities of black women. Returning to the artistry of Niall-Julian Watkins in the opening pages of this conclusion offers support for my assertion. Of all the memes in circulation following Newsome's ascent up the flagpole, Watkins's appears most demonstrative of my own personal hope for the future of black women's representation. He captures the richness of Newsome's brown skin, the fullness of her thighs, and the majesty of her locs. In his rendering, Newsome appears to scale the flagpole without a harness – not in an attempt to demonstrate formidable strength – but simply because she is in full embrace of her freedom. This is an important convention of the sexual script – whether or not this device is explicitly linked to sexuality. Recalling how the sexual script points in the direction of action reveals how each black leading lady is guided in text to an embodied manifestation. The sexual script is a path to subjective fullness, which is precisely what I believe is most clearly unveiled in Davis and Newsome as black leading ladies.

Moreover, as my own research into the sexual script/sexual scenario and the black leading lady deepens so, too, will my attention to queer politics within its operation. The subjects of this dissertation are identified as decidedly heteronormative – in gender expression, sexuality, and demonstration of professional success. Throughout the dissertation, I argue this the result of how the black leading lady needs to procure certain qualifications in order for her blackness to become legible to mainstream audiences, thereby enabling her access to various public stages. Michelle Obama, for instance, demonstrates her heteronormative conformity by claiming “Mom-in-Chief” and emphasizing her gendered domestic proclivities as a spouse. Olivia Pope engages in

heterosexual intimacy and asserts professional authority in ways generally attributed to men. Though not expressly connected to sexuality, Vera Stark seeks a career in an industry intent on maintaining gendered and racialized prescriptions for its female characters. As more black women are incorporated into the frame of the black leading lady, it will be imperative to address how heteronormativity continues – or discontinues – as a driving force of the public scripting of this persona.

Turning to the arena of politics offers a helpful entry into complicating heteronormative imaging of the black leading lady, especially with physicality and sexuality. In January 2014, white Democrat Bill de Blasio was sworn in as the 109<sup>th</sup> mayor of New York City. His wife of nearly twenty years is Chirlane McCray, a black poet and writer who used to be a member of the Combahee River Collective and a self-identified lesbian.<sup>111</sup> Chirlane McCray regularly appears in public sporting long dreadlocks. She also is phenotypically darker skinned. What interests me the most about Chirlane McCray's emergence as a black leading lady, particularly within the field of politics, is how she challenges what Roderick Ferguson reveals is the "nature of (homo)sexuality [to] index the contemporary entrance of white gays and lesbians into the rights and privileges of American citizenship" (53). In this way, I am interested in uncovering how the sexual script situates black queer bodies and subjectivities into a broader understanding of the way heteronormativity enacts a particularly violent disenfranchisement at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship.

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<sup>111</sup> In 1979, McCray penned the essay, "I Am a Lesbian" for *Essence* magazine. For more on McCray's ascension into public life, see Andrew Marantz, "The Significant Other."

Examining a figure like Chirlane McCray – whose status as a mayoral First Lady suggests similarities to the labor of a national First Lady, and whose interracial marriage and political partnership emerges from a faithfully queer sensibility – appears to offer a promising trajectory for the sexual script’s didactic potentiality in challenging the black leading lady’s adherence to heteronormativity.<sup>112</sup>

Future research into the black leading lady should also give greater attention to the stage upon which she is featured. This comment is offered, in part, to acknowledge the breadth of platforms currently supporting the black leading lady imaging across this dissertation: politics, television, and theatre. Yet, there remain many sites and subjects that would deepen the contours of the black leading lady persona. This comment is also given as a point of clarification for those who would necessarily assume the black leading lady *only* refers to black women who are coded normative in their personal and professional success. The basis of my argument claims the black leading lady is substantiated in her visibility and popularity. While I remain firm in this position, I also believe that qualifications for visibility and popularity need to shift as the black leading lady imaging moves out of mainstream publics toward more intimate publics that deal expressly with the everyday. The representative tropes of black womanhood vis-à-vis the mammy, the jezebel, the matriarch, and the welfare queen have had a profound effect on black women writ large. I wholly contend that, over time, the black leading lady will

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<sup>112</sup> In May 2015, Chirlane McCray fielded questions from the public via a Facebook forum, one of which asked if she still identified as a lesbian. The *New York Observer* reports that McCray “visibly rolled her eyes” and continued onto the next question without responding. I offer this to emphasize how the ambiguity of McCray’s sexuality – whether she openly identifies as queer or not – is precisely why the black leading lady persona needs a stronger engagement with queer politics. For more information, including a link to the Facebook forum, see Ross Barker, “‘Are You Still a Lesbian?...”

operate in similar ways. As such, I believe careful attention to the stage informing the performance of the black leading lady will better allow audiences to recognize the assembly of this persona in spaces not presently associated with her imaging.

In the concluding case study of this dissertation, I revealed how historical archives act as a site of truth and as a demonstration of intentional curation. Lynn Nottage's archival manipulation in *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark* illustrates how Vera Stark's emergence as a black leading lady enacts a re-vision of history. Vera Stark merges black women's filmic tropes with the limited biographies of early twentieth century black actresses to expose black women's charged relationship with historical memory, particularly that which is cataloged in archival records. Even as Vera Stark succumbs to the representational perils of her stereotypical predecessor of the domestic servant/slave in film, her manifestation as a contemporary black leading lady gives way to re-imagining a different engagement with black womanhood in the archive and in everyday life. Vera Stark, like Michelle Obama and Olivia Pope, is positioned to be "on the verge" of something extraordinary. Though Vera Stark appears anachronistic for the sociopolitical and sociocultural context of the 1930s, for the twenty-first century she is more than primed for the flux of social advances in representation currently being sought. Therein lies her energizing force: whatever subjugated history the archive constructs and holds for black women, the black leading lady's arrival has forcefully undermined its historic operation. To put simply, the black leading lady demands our sustained and fervent attention.

The black leading lady prompts reconsideration for how public memory will attend to the way black women are inserted into the prevailing discourse of United States ideology and history. Yet, her progressive nature is merely a humble beginning to the difficult work that remains to be done in order to incorporate the breadth of black women's livelihood into the national and global narrative of human experience. I chose to situate Bree Newsome into this discussion, in part, because of her heroism, and also because her emergence as a black leading lady is attendant to the non-celebratory aspects of black life. Bree Newsome discharged the Confederate flag from its prominent display because she recognized its attendant violence, a violence that is routine and unbridled in its particular assault against black women. Moreover, as historian Kali N. Gross admonishes, this violence is systemic, institutionally sanctioned, and rarely gets acknowledged in public outcry, let alone recorded for future testimony.

In the era of the black leading lady, Gross reminds us of the less revered side of black womanhood: those who suffer from brutal domestic violence, alarming H.I.V. infection rates, and discriminatory criminal justice practices.<sup>113</sup> Even as Misty Copeland makes history as the first black principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre, there is a black teenage girl being yanked to the ground by her braids while attending a pool party in McKinney, TX. Tennis superstar, Serena Williams, can recover from missing a Grand Slam title by appearing triumphantly in New York's Fashion Week. Yet, Sandra Bland remains dead from an alleged suicide after being pulled over and arrested at a traffic stop

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<sup>113</sup> In the fall of 2014, video footage was released of NFL player, Ray Rice, knocking his then-fiancée Janay Parker unconscious in an elevator, and then dragging her body off. Kali Gross writes a poignant op-ed for the *Huffington Post* linking the Ray Rice assault to a widespread lack of concern for black women's lives in the United States. For more, see Kali N. Gross, "Black Women Are Already Dead...."

for reasons that remain suspiciously inconclusive. These are just a handful of the moments that reveal how black leading lady serves as a cautionary lesson for the way the (in)valuable reverence of contemporary black womanhood remains intimately linked to her (in)visible humiliation.



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## **Vita**

Nicole L. Martin was born in the wheat fields of Kansas in the winter of 1983. She attended three high schools in three different states, graduating in 2002 at Marquette High School in Chesterfield, MO. That fall, she began attendance at the University of Texas at Austin for her undergraduate studies, graduating in 2006 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Relations. Two years later, Nicole moved to Tempe, Arizona to continue her education, and received her Master of Arts degree in Communication in 2010 with an emphasis in Rhetoric and Performance Studies. Her master's thesis is titled, "Michelle Obama: A Womanist/(Black) Auto/Biographical Analysis of Self-Identification." In the fall of 2010, Nicole returned to the University of Texas at Austin to pursue her doctoral studies in the Performance as Public Practice program in the Department of Theatre of Dance to work under the guidance of Dr. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones.

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This dissertation was typed by Nicole L. Martin.